

Beyond Freedom



Jennie Taylor

Freedom

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Chapter One

“Is everybody okay?” I asked. We had just crash landed—for lack of a better term—on the moon that would be our new home. “Doctor, can you check on everyone?”

“Yes Captain, I will. As soon as I can breathe again.”

I undid my belts and stumbled to my feet. My head hurt from where it had banged back into the seat when we stopped. My arms were bruised from thrashing against the console, and my ankle hurt.

Anna sat still, her eyes closed. As I neared her, she moved up to unbuckle her belts. Her eyes slid open, pinning me in place with a clear, bright stare.

“We made it.” she whispered.

“Yes.”

I bent forward, leaning in to hug her, then risked a quick kiss. I was so happy to see that she was alive and well. At least from what I could see, she was.

“Svetlana, are you okay?” I heard Dr. Gershawn ask. “Captain, I think everyone is okay, but Svetlana needs to lay down for a while, perhaps.”

“Yes. Sure. Good idea.” I said.

I could only imagine how scared she must have been. I knew I would have been at four years old, anyway. I didn’t think the poor girl had even begun to grasp that her family and almost everyone she knew— everyone except those of us on the Thumper— was dead now.

“Let’s go have a look around!” Ensign Debartolo suggested.

“Wait.” I told him. “We need to do some scans to make sure it is safe out there for us.”

“But Commander Xiang said all our instruments are down.” he said.

He had a point, and I knew it. I looked around at my crew. How could I just send them out there without knowing if it was safe? Yet we had no way to check things like air gas ratios, or even to see if there were acids that would eat away at our skin?

“What do we have onboard for checking air quality?” I asked.

“I have two handheld meters,” Dr. Gershawn said. “They are used for emergency response crews when going to a scene.”

“Okay.” I said. I looked around at my crew. Yes, they were still *my* crew-- at least until they were safe and I could step down. “I’ll be the one going out to check. I’ll need you to show me how to--”

“I’ll go along.” Bao interrupted.

In many ways Bao would be a logical choice to go out. She was a magician of an engineer, and one of the smartest people I had ever met. But I needed her to stay behind to take care of the crew if anything happened to me. She should have been in charge of the mission anyway, not me.

“No, you’ll stay here in case... just in case.” I ordered.

“Then I’ll go.” Anna offered.

“No chance.” I told her.

I hadn’t managed to bring her along, to spare her life above all the thousands who perished upon the Freedom, just to have her die in the first ten minutes upon landing here. Not *her*!

I looked around, pausing to look into the eyes of each crewmember. They were frightened. Terrified. And they were all completely necessary. There was no way I could risk losing them, and I knew that.

“I’ll be going alone, just in case it isn’t safe.”

“That doesn’t even make sense, dumbass.” Shauna said. She cracked a smile. “If it isn’t safe out there then it won’t do us much good knowing that once you’re dead. It’s not like we can just decide to leave, right?”

“But you may have time to make another plan to deal with whatever the problem is.” I pointed out. “And you’ll have the second handheld meter for someone else to give it a try.”

“I don’t like this at all.” Anna said. “Callie, let me go instead of you.”

“No.”

“I have an engineering background so I have a better chance of understanding what that meter will show.”

“Yeah right.” I said. “Nice try, but I think I can understand it well enough.”

I went down to the cargo hold and got into one of the hazard suits we had. Dr. Gershawn showed me the basics on the meter, all of which were pretty obvious anyway, and she went back up to the crew deck. Bao finished buttoning up my suit for me, then turned to face me before she let me put the helmet on.

“I’m going to go back up to the crew deck and seal the hatch there so we won’t all be poisoned when you open this door.” she said. “Good luck out there, kiddo.”

“Thanks.”

“Be careful, Callie.” Anna told me. “Please.”

“I will.”

The two of them disappeared up the ladder and I placed the helmet over my head. I sealed it up and took one last chance to check the meter. Then I hit the button and waited for the door to open.

The ports on Thumper were coated with a reflective tint. It didn’t distort colors much, but it did mute them. So the ground that had appeared to be a grayish purple through them was actually much more of a darkened gray with barely a purple tint to it at all, and the sky was even a brighter orange. Though the latter could be because the sun was coming up. Or rather, our moon was coming clear of the planet so that the light from the star for the system could reach us.

It was odd. There was a barrenness to the world that I was seeing. All I could see was the clearing we were in and, in the distance, the trees we had nearly smashed into, so it wouldn’t be fair to make that assumption yet, but it seemed that way. From my vantage point I couldn’t even see the stream we had splashed around in.

I took my first step out, nearly falling because of the gravity differential between the deck of Thumper, which generated an artificial gravity force about equal to that of Earth, and the moon, which might be seventy percent Earth’s gravity. Once I righted my feet, I held up the meter and flipped the switch on. The screen started flashing yellow boxes with warning messages.

"In yellow for oxygen." I said over the comm. "And nitrogen."

"Higher or lower?" Dr. Gershawn asked.

"Lower oxygen, higher nitrogen. And higher helium. There are some blips of some other trace gases being picked up, but not much to speak of."

"So nothing is in the red?" she asked, the comm spitting out enough static that I had to think about it before understanding her.

"Nothing red, no. So we should be good to go, right?"

"Unless there is something out there we don't know to check for." Anna's voice said, echoey and distant sounding.

That was a good point. We hadn't seen whatever it was that was mixed in with those meteoroids, and it ended up destroying the UNSC Atlantic Gale and UNSC Freedom. It would pay to be cautious.

"How can we tell, Doctor?" I asked.

"I'd like to set up some tests using bacteria I have onboard to make sure they don't react to anything in the air." Dr. Gershawn replied.

That was not the answer I wanted to hear, and not one I could accept.

"That sounds time consuming." I said. "Meanwhile, you all sit in there and suffocate."

"It won't take long. Maybe a few hours."

"That's a few hours you'll need to come up with a plan if it isn't safe out here." I told her. "It looks okay, based on what we can test for, right?"

"Captain, we can't risk all our lives based on just that."

"Not all our lives, Doctor." I said. "Just mine."

"Callie, what are you planning?" Anna asked, sounding alarmed. "Don't you dare take that helmet off!"

"You don't even know, you may freeze to death, kiddo." Bao said.

"Air temp on this sensor shows it's about five degrees out here." I argued. "Not warm, but above freezing."

"Callie, no!" Anna shouted.

"Don't do it, Captain." Bao said. "Your parents wouldn't want you to die because you were stupid. They'd blame me for letting you."

"I'll tell them it wasn't your fault if I end up with them soon." I told her.

Against their continued arguments, I released the seal on my helmet. I didn't take it off completely, I let the suit air dilute the outside air for a moment. I felt okay. It smelled faintly of licorice, but I was breathing okay. It was a little more difficult than usual, but the oxygen level was below the normal level. It didn't seem dangerous, though.

I removed my helmet, then made my way around to the front of Thumper, watching my breath fog out around me for the first time in my life. I had seen it in movies, but never witnessed it until that moment.

"Look out the front port." I said into the comm.

Anna's face appeared in the port almost immediately. Bao's and Dr. Gershawn's both followed less than a second later. I made exaggerated waves at them, then blew a kiss to Anna.

"I had no idea you felt that way about me, kiddo." Bao's voice said over the comm.

"Oh ha ha." I told her. "It seems safe. At least as safe as we're going to be able to tell. It's a little cold, but if everyone would start to bundle up some, I will come back in and we can decide what is next."

"Be careful." Anna warned.

I went back inside and sealed the door. By the time I was able to slide out of my suit, Anna and Bao were down the ladder and dressed in several layers of clothing.

"We're going out to check the ship." Bao told me. "We had to have received a *lot* of damage during that messy landing. Sorry I couldn't bring it in softer, Captain."

"Not exactly your fault, Bao." I said. "You two hang on until I can slip on some different clothes and I'll come along."

"Are you sure you want to go back out there?" Anna asked. "I guess you could just put the hazard suit back on."

"I suppose I could." I said, feeling stupid. "Hang on."

After securing my suit again—without the helmet this time—I opened the hatch and Anna, Bao and I stepped out into the orange day.

It was full daytime now. The sky wasn't quite as dark of an orange I had thought it was, but it was still an orange color. And the

trees were still red, the dirt still that grayish, slightly purple tint.

“This is beautiful.” Anna said, awe clear in her voice.

“Damn wrong is what it is.” Bao said. “Humans were meant to look up into a blue sky, Wilson. Haven’t you heard that? And the dirt should be brown, just like what we had on the farms aboard the Freedom.”

“It’s so big!”

“So is my butt.”

“Can we focus less on your butt, please?” I said, and then felt embarrassed for some reason. “We’re out here to check the condition of the ship. I’d kind of like to know if we’re going to have a reactor blow anytime soon, for starters, Commander Xiang.”

“Yes Captain, I was just looking at that.” she replied.

The ship. Thumper. It was bent and twisted all over. Even the top section had dents, though I’m not sure how they got there. I was surprised that it had held air pressure at all with the condition it was in. And looking down at the heat shield– or where it *had been*, anyway– I was surprised we had survived at all. The bottom section of the ship was distorted where the metal had begun to melt. There was no sign remaining of the heat shield. It was, frankly, hard to believe that I hadn’t bothered to look down at that when I came out before.

“Holy hell, we’re lucky to be alive.” Bao said.

“Well,” Anna said, tilting her head in thought. “It’s not like we thought we would ever be able to fly it again, anyway. At least it held up well enough to get us here.”

“At least *here*,” I said. “Is survivable. Short term, anyway.”

“I thought you were confident it would be?” Anna asked.

“Confident? Hardly. More like... hopeful, I guess.”

“I had faith in your intuition, kiddo.” Bao said, clapping me on the back.

We continued around the Thumper, taking in all the damage. I was surprised we didn’t see some of these dents from the inside. And very surprised the cabin pressure held.

Anna made a show of bending and leaping, noticing as I had the diminished gravity on our new home. She also kicked at the dirt, noting how silty it was.

“We’re up to twelve degrees.” Bao said. “This place warms up quickly.”

“Good.” Anna said. “It’s still cold.”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t get too warm.” Bao added. “We’re all used to a balmy twenty on Freedom. I think if it passes thirty we’re all going to start noticing it a bit.”

“Yikes.” Anna said. “Wow, do you think it’ll get that warm?”

“Perhaps.” Bao told her.

“Can we even survive that?”

“There were places on Earth that passed fifty and people survived it.” I explained. “I saw it in a vid. People lived in a place called Death Valley.”

“Lived, or boiled?” Anna asked. “How can you survive that? Did they have special suits to cool them down?”

Before I could even think to reply I was distracted by a small impact on my sleeve. I looked down, worried that there was insect life on this moon, and saw a wet spot. Then another appeared. Tears? I wasn’t crying, so it had to be...

“Back inside!” I shouted. “Now!”

“What?” Anna asked.

“Shit.” Bao said. She had felt a drop too. “Go now, Wilson!” Bao shouted. “No more questions.”

Bao shoved us and I found my head draped in cloth. I glanced sideways and saw that Anna’s was as well. Bao had shed the two cloth wraps she had covered with and was doing her best to cover both Anna’s head and mine, leaving herself completely unprotected.

We re-entered the ship and slid the door shut. Anna and I looked at each other for a quick second, then both turned to Bao. Her hair was actually wet, and her shirt had blotches of water.

We just watched. Waiting, I suppose, for whatever was going to happen to her. I should have insisted she get into a shower to rinse off whatever may be in that rain but, I didn’t think of it.

“I’m okay.” Bao said.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “Never do that.”

“You two were being rained on, and I was afraid the rain may be poisonous.”

“So, what, you were going to sacrifice yourself, Commander?” Anna asked. “That was noble.”

“It’s my duty to protect the captain.” Bao explained.

“It’s your duty to protect yourself.” I insisted.

“But why did you take off the second layer to cover me?” Anna asked. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Like I said, it’s my duty to protect the captain.” Bao explained. “That includes keeping her from having heartbreak when her girlfriend dies from poisoned rain.”

That was followed by an uncomfortable silence. Bao would have died for Anna just to protect my feelings? That seemed insane to me. But nice to know.

“Are you three okay?” Dr. Gershawn called down the ladder. “I need to check you out. Did you get wet? Did the rain burn your skin? I’ll want to check the chemical makeup of that water.”

“Is it acid?” I heard Shauna ask from behind the doctor. “Shit, say it isn’t acid. We aren’t all going to make it this far just to die from acid raining on us, are we?”

“I don’t want to die.” I heard Svetlana say, just before she broke into tears.

“We’re not going to die, Sveta.” I shout up. “Right?” I asked Dr. Gershawn.

“Of course not!” Dr. Gershawn said. “What kind of doctor would I be if I let you all die from something this simple?”

We climbed up into the crew deck and, with the rest of the crew, watched through the ports as rain fell, its sickly orange-red color staining the glass.

“What if it isn’t safe?” Chief Duval asked. “What then?”

“We all stay in here and suffocate?” Ensign Pok suggested. “Seems like the best plan, right?”

“Not the kind of plan I intend to follow.” Ensign Debartolo told her. His eyes darted up to mine. “That is unless the captain orders it, ma’am.” he said.

“I don’t see any chemicals in here that are unsafe.” Dr. Gershawn said, staring at some kind of instrument she had in her hands. “I’ll do more tests on the water out there after it stops... what did you call it?”

“Raining.” I said.

“Yes,” she said, blushing. “Of course.”

We had never seen rain before this. It was much like the irrigation systems we had for the farms on Freedom. Except beautiful. And natural. And amazing. There was a certain kind of randomness to the patterns of droplets hitting the port glass. It was almost completely

unlike the symmetry of the sprinkles from Freedom's irrigation systems.

"The... rain? Is tapering off." Chief Preston said, nearly an hour later on.

"About fucking time!" Shauna exclaimed. "I thought I was going to die from boredom."

"Thank all the holy spirits!" Dr. Gershawn said, making her way back in from one of the sleep cabins at the back. "I tested the water. It's not quite up to our normal standards, as far as mineral content, but it won't kill us. Not immediately, at least."

"That's all I needed to hear." I said. "Let's start getting ready to head out, people."

"We still haven't tested the air." Chief Preston pointed out.

"We can't stay in here much longer, Gina." I said. "We're going out."

"Big chance to take with the last members of the human race."

"Yes. But what choice do we have?"

Everyone kind of agreed, at least enough to not argue. I had the doctor stay behind, and she kept Svetlana with her. Sveta's little lungs were more susceptible to problems with the air, and she wanted to limit her exposure until after we had all breathed in the air for a while.

Everyone kind of walked around in the sprinkling rain and looked into the distance, at the sky and trees and dirt— all things we had never witnessed in person until then. Shauna and Chief Duval were laughing and kicking water from a large puddle at each other.

"Okay guys," I said. "Maybe we can start setting up the tents. We need to get them up by nightfall, so we can be inside before it gets too cold."

"Yes. And I made sure to bring a couple of heaters, just in case." Bao added.

The crew, including Shauna surprisingly, began working hard at getting the blue canvas tenting set up, giving us some structure to protect us for the night. At least a little.

We spent hours moving supplies into the tents. We had five rooms of various sizes. I assigned the largest as a sort of kitchen/dining/meeting area, and four smaller rooms that surrounded it as quarters.

"We need to decide who shares which rooms." I said to the crew, who had finished moving most of the supplies into the main room, which connected on one side to Thumper. "We have two small rooms and two that are a little larger. I think we'll let Dr. Gershawn take one of the rooms on Thumper, so she can use the equipment and coolers on there as long as they work. That leaves eleven of us."

"You take the other room on Thumper, Captain." Bao said.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "We need to leave that for the doctor to use for patients."

"That means three of us in two of the rooms out here, four in the other, then." she told me. "You okay with one of the smaller rooms for yourself?"

"I can share." I said.

"Great." she said, nodding. "You and Wilson in one room, then." She turned to the others. "Kre, Pok, you're with me. Everyone else divide up into the other two rooms."

I let it go at that, letting them choose. It fell as you'd assume, with Debartolo, Duval and Kouri in one room, and Preston in with Shauna, and those two taking in Svetlana. I was glad; I assumed Anna and I were going to end up taking care of Svetlana.

With the room assignments made, we went about moving bedding and personal items into our new quarters. All we had for beds were pads, but the ground was drying very quickly and we hoped that it would stay dry if it rained again, not running in under the tent side.

By the time night had fallen we had finished up our preparations and gathered in the central room.

"Um," Chief Kouri said, looking down at a small propane powered cook stove. "Does anyone know how to cook?"

We all looked around at each other, waiting for someone to volunteer. In all my preparations, in all my calculating and studying, in all my work to determine who should come, and I managed to not find anyone who could cook.

"Ideas, Captain?" Kre asked.

"Well," I said. "I'm sure we have a guide, or... something... um... I'll give it a try, I guess."

"I've cooked before." Dr. Gershawn said from the door to Thumper. "I enjoy it sometimes. I'll take care of it for now, and I'll

show a couple of you the basics. Nothing to it, really.”

We all sat on pads around a sort of kneeling table, waiting and watching as Dr. Gershawn made us rice and chicken, making sure not to add any chicken to my portion. We hadn’t eaten anything other than a protein bar each all day long, and I heard stomachs growling all around.

When she served the food for us, I doubt I was the only one who thought it was the best tasting meal I had ever eaten. Of course I’m sure that was only because we were so hungry.

“What’s next, Captain?” Duval asked.

“Well, first off, we do away with the silly ranks.” I told him. “We’re not on ship anymore. I’m not your captain.”

“You’re still the captain, kiddo.” Bao said. Poking a spoon my direction. “Always will be.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I almost got us all killed. I got Colton killed. I don’t—”

“Callie, that wasn’t your fault.” Anna said, giving me a sideways hug.

“It doesn’t matter.” I told them all. “We don’t need a captain anymore. We have time to discuss things and come to decisions together. We have time to vote. Everyone here has equal importance. We should not have a hierarchy where my opinion outweighs any of yours.”

“With all due respect, Captain,” Ensign Kre said. “It does. I trust your opinion more than my own.”

“That’s not...” I said, then sighed. “That’s very flattering, Ashley, and I am honored you think that way. But it’s not right. I don’t want that anymore.”

“Callie, you’ve wanted to be captain for your entire life.” Anna reminded me.

And she was right, I did want that. And for nearly all my life. But when I had the chance to lead, I screwed it all up. I got us to the situation we were in, lucky to be alive.

And I didn’t want that anymore. But sometimes responsibility is thrust upon you.

“Fine,” Bao said. “Then let’s vote for our leadership. Will that work for you, kiddo?”

“Yes, but—”

"I nominate Callie as captain." Anna blurted.

"No, that's not--"

"Second." Bao spat out. "All in favor say aye."

"Aye." sounded a chorus of voices.

"Well then, Captain," Bao said, smiling at me. "That's decided then."

"No!" I shouted.

Everyone jumped-- including me-- at the volume of my voice. I think Svetlana shrank back behind Dr. Gershawn, even.

"No more of this insane rank." I said.

"But we need a leader--"

"Why?!" I said. "Why Bao?"

"Because we have no fuckin' clue what the hell is coming next, how 'bout?" Shauna replied instead.

"Because life keeps trying to kick our asses," Bao said, reaching out to touch my arm. "And you, kiddo, are the one we trust to make the right decision at the right time to keep us from it."

"Fine," I said, shaking my head no and giving up at the same time. "But stop calling me captain."

"Then what do we call you?" Anna asked. "You are our captain?"

"How about Callie?" I suggested.

"Fine, Callie," Bao said. "Unless we are in a situation where it matters. Everyone agreed?"

Everyone nodded, and from that point on I was no longer Captain Calliope Eun-ji Monroe, I was just Callie. Not that it mattered any. Only it wasn't true. I was still Captain Monroe. Even if they didn't call me that.

And in that capacity, I reminded my crew that we needed to get up early the next day to try to figure out more permanent lodging. I suggested we all work on ideas of how to accomplish this, as well as how we treat the water to make it drinkable.

Anna and I retired to our room, using our portable light to guide our way, where we huddled together on the single pad on the ground, ready to sleep.

"It feels weird sleeping like this." I said. "I mean... because, ya know? Because we're together."

"It's not like we're doing anything except sleeping, Callie." she

said. "We slept by each other when we were younger."

"I know. But... I wasn't, like, in love with you then." I said, feeling heat rising in my face as it did every time I said that.

"That is true." she said. "Go to sleep, Callie."

—

The next day was spent exploring our general vicinity. We figured out that overnight it would get down below zero, and we all were quite chilly even with the heaters. It also got over forty in the afternoon. And the day was about twenty hours, not the twenty four hour cycle we were used to using.

"So, question for you Captain," Chief Duval said.

"Just Callie, Mister Duval." I reminded him.

"Then call me Robby, please. And the question is how we build this new structure you are wanting us to build? What do we construct it of?"

There were a group of us crowded at the edge of the woods, around half a kilometer from Thumper. They all stopped poking about and turned to look directly at me. I looked away, staring into the stream nearby, with its red tinted water splashing up on the shore.

Why did I have to be the one to come up with ideas? It seemed unfair to me. Especially since I didn't want to be the captain anymore.

"Don't sweat it, kiddo." Bao said, clapping me on the shoulder a little too hard, forcing me to stumble. "We'll figure something out." she said, grabbing onto me and righting me.

"Wasn't there like some kind of crazy-shit house in that movie we saw?" Shauna asked.

"Which movie?" Alvin Debartolo asked.

"Oh, damn, you know, Callie, that one that was so bad it made my ass hurt?"

"I don't..."

But then it occurred to me what she was talking about, and it was an obvious answer. I should have actually seen it and known right away.

"A log cabin" I told her. "It's a kind of house that they used to make on Earth, I think." I explained to the group. "They would stack logs on top of each other, and they'd notch each end and overlap them

with the adjacent wall to keep everything together.”

“How did they hold them?” Bao asked.

She had kicked into engineer mode. I tried to explain, but I wasn’t completely sure how it was all done myself. It must have been enough, because before long she was nodding her head and looking up like she did sometimes when she was calculating her plan of action.

“I think I understand,” she said. “But it’s going to take a lot of logs. Where do you want to build this thing?”

“Isn’t it best to keep it over close to the Thumper?” I asked.

“I agree with that.” Anna said. “We’re not going to be able to move the Thumper, and we need the doctor and the facilities inside it nearby.”

“It’ll be easier to defend, too.” Robby Duval said. I must have seemed confused, because he continued. “We have no idea what really lurks on this planet. There could be dangerous wildlife out there. By having a clear view around our shelter we make it less likely we’ll be attacked by surprise.”

I looked around the trees quickly, feeling a tad scared.

Everyone else must have been scared as well, because when I pulled my eyes away from the forest I could see everyone else glancing around.

“How do we get the logs the hell all the way over there?” Shauna asked.

“That’s a good question.” Robby responded.

“We roll them.” Bao explained. “We chop off the branches, we cut down the trunk, and we roll it all the way over.”

“That’s a long way, Commander.” Anna said.

“We’re not using rank anymore, Anna.” I reminded.

“Bao.” she corrected.

“Yeah, it’s a long way. But we have time.”

We went back to the tents to discuss the issue with the rest of the group. The Doctor had been busy while we were out, and she had figured out what we needed to do to filter the water enough to make it safe to drink.

At least she thought so.

I volunteered as guinea pig, but Anna stepped up and took a drink before I could.

"You already risked your life to find out about the air." she said.

With water we could drink, and air we could breathe, it seemed like we were okay for the time being, so we set out to make plans for the future.

Dr. Gershawn let Ailanna Pok do the cooking that evening. They fried hamburgers and french fries. Being a vegetarian, instead of a burger I had salad.

"We're all going to be vegetarians soon. Or nearly." Dr. Gershawn told us.

"How so?" Kre asked.

"We aren't going to be able to live off our supplies that we brought for long. Starting tomorrow, I'd like someone to assist me in searching the foliage near us for edible plants. We'll start with that. We can consider meat products later on."

"So what if the plants are poisonous?" asked Robby Duval.

"I'll test them carefully before anyone eats them." she explained. "And no tasting before I'm finished, thank you very much." she added, giving a pointed stare at me and Anna.

"When will we consider them safe to eat, Doc?" Bao asked. "After extensive testing, I'll ask for volunteers. We'll start by introducing the plants a tiny bit at a time to that person, then wait to see if they have any problems. If they don't, we'll increase the amount in stages until I am sure they are safe. *Then* we can let the whole crew eat them."

"Sounds like a plan." Shauna said. She shrugged and glanced around. "I'll volunteer, Doctor."

"I'll keep that in mind, Miss Cook. Thank you."

It had been a very long day, and we retired to our individual rooms for the night. It was cold, and Anna and I huddled near each other under the blankets.

"Today was good." I said.

"Yeah, it was. We were able to get some water, too, so that's a very positive step." Anna replied.

"Yeah."

"I miss my parents, Callie." Anna said.

"I know. I miss Milton, too. He was not my father, but--"

"But he raised you."

“Yes.”

It was quiet for a while. I felt like I should be crying, but I just didn't. It wasn't that I didn't miss Milton or the crew enough to cry for them, or that I wasn't scared enough for the rest of us that I could cry for that, I just think I had simply cried so much over the previous days and weeks that I was dried up.

“Goodnight, Anna.”

“Goodnight.”

“I love you.”

There was a long, pause. I wasn't sure if she had dozed off, or if it just meant she wasn't going to respond.

“I know.” she said, letting out a small giggle.

Chapter Two

Two weeks after our landing in the clearing, Anna and I went off into the woods. We set out just after sunrise, out to look for more plants of the kind that had been near the edges of the clearing. Dr. Gershawn had begun testing many of the plants, and had found one that she deemed safe to eat.

The plants we were looking for were bluish-green, with bright orange and yellow flowers that were about five centimeters across. It had edible roots, which tasted a little like a potato mixed with honey, with only the slightest smoky flavor underneath.

The problem we had was that there seemed to be a very limited supply of the plants near the clearing. We had begun eating about three a day, as a group, and would run out within a month. Since that was the only plant that had proven safe to eat so far, it was important that we find more.

And I had an idea where to look.

I remembered seeing a flickering of light in the distance during our atmospheric entry. I was pretty sure the light was just a reflection off the surface of water. We had no indication that the plants needed to be near water, but we had to head some direction, and that was the one I wanted to go.

Anna and I had gone out into the woods several times in the week prior to that. Sometimes we would take Svetlana, sometimes not. Sometimes one of the other crew-- Shauna or Gina-- would accompany us. This trip was our first overnight trip, and we would be going alone.

In the previous weeks our cabin had begun to take shape. We had laid out the plans for a dirt floor structure with a great room and six bedrooms. There would be no bathroom. The 'facilities', as Dr. Gershawn called them, were going to be built twenty yards from the

main structure, to avoid the smell of the open pit toilet.

As of that morning, our cabin walls were only about knee high. That was a great start, but it would take ages to finish. And we still hadn't completely figured out the best way to complete the roof.

Anna and I needed a break, though, and we were happy to go off searching for the plants. At least *I* was happy. I think Anna was. Sometimes she was hard to read, and I could never be completely sure. I knew I loved her, but I couldn't be so sure how she felt.

As we walked through the trees, along an area that was less overgrown, there was movement to our right. I spun my head quickly, trying to get a better look, but it was gone.

"It was one of those squirrel things," Anna told me.

The *squirrel things* she was talking about were small animals that had begun showing up near the clearing the past few days. They weren't really squirrels— at least I didn't think so— but they looked a lot like them. About the same size, anyway. Though they did have two tails instead of one, and scurried along on six legs instead of four. Still, they did have the distinct look of a typical gray squirrel. The very same kind we had all seen in many old Earth movies.

"I'm starting to like this gravity level," Anna told me. "I lost weight without going on a diet."

"Yes, but your mass hasn't changed," I pointed out.

"Are you calling me massive, you little jerk?" Anna asked, laughing.

"No, no," I assured her. "Not even close. I think you are perfect the way you are. I just meant that the only reason you weigh less is because—"

"I know. I was just teasing you."

She tugged my arm until I stopped and turned toward her. She smiled and leaned toward me, our lips meeting.

"I love you," I told her.

"So you've said," she said, turning and starting her walk again.

That's all she said about the subject, and it left me feeling so torn. I couldn't be certain whether she was intentionally avoiding saying it back because she didn't love me and didn't want to upset me

by saying so, or if it just never occurred to her to say so.

We walked long into the day. The further from the clearing and stream we got, the denser the trees got. And those trees changed shape. The ones nearest the clearing were divided between the kind of trees I had read about kids climbing back on Earth, and some of the kind that are something like the Christmas trees I had seen in movies. But the ones we had begun to come across were very different. Clearly trees, but different from anything I had ever read about or seen in movies.

The first odd ones I noticed would emerge from the ground, arc up, then curve back into the ground. I wasn't sure if the tree grew from both ends, or came up out of the ground before arching back down. And some would come up, make a ninety degree turn, then go across. The trunks of those trees varied in size, ranging from half a meter to at least three meters.

And then, as we got further in, we came across trees that weren't the bright red of the other trees, but instead had a subdued green colored bark on the trunk. The really interesting thing about those were that they had almost no branches, and they grew upward in a spiral. They weren't huge, maybe half meter trunks and maybe only fifteen meters tall, but they were very pretty.

"Look at that one." Anna said, pointing to the side.

Like most of the trees, these were a red color- albeit a deeper red. Instead of having round trunks these were flat. Flat as in maybe ten centimeters thick one way, and between one and a half and five meters the other direction. They were basically planks with a lot of small branches. They were maybe fifty meters tall, and seemed a consistent size all the way up. There were only a few, and some of those had a slight twist in the middle.

"Maybe those would work well for the cabin." she said.

"Eh," I mumbled. "How would we drag them all that way? They wouldn't exactly roll."

At one point we came across about five of the arch shaped trees in a row. We turned their direction, walking through them as if they were an archway leading us down a path to some amazing destination.

“Look,” I told Anna, and I nodded out in front of us.

We held our breaths, not wanting to scare it away. It was a rabbit. A real rabbit. Sure, its fur was an odd yellow hue, but it was a dead on copy of the rabbits we had on the farms on Freedom.

It turned its eyes our way and its ears began to twitch. After just a moment it darted to the side and disappeared into the trees.

“I wonder if they are safe to eat.” Anna said.

“How could you eat such a cute and harmless little creature!?” I asked her, shocked at the suggestion. I guess I shouldn’t have been, really.

“Hey, we have to live. Plus, we don’t know they are harmless. They could be carrying a horrible disease. They could be poisonous. For all we know they are vicious, and the only reason it didn’t attack was because they only attack in groups.”

“Oh thanks, I needed that thought in the back of my mind tonight while I’m trying to sleep.” I told her.

Then, to make things even scarier, a moment later I saw a snake-like creature a dozen meters off to the side of our direction. It was maybe close to two meters long... tall? I don’t know, it was standing up on its tail, which ended with a single widened paw that was furry like any other animal’s would be. But the rest of the snake wasn’t, it was smooth and scaly, kind of shiny, and a muted blue color. I wondered idly if it moved along by hopping on that single paw, or if it laid down and slithered like a normal Earth snake would.

As I was about to point out the creature, I saw it stretch over to the side and bite into a large berry, actually pulling it off the vine before swallowing it whole, its jaw dislocating as you’d expect a snake’s jaw to do.

A vegetarian snake? That would be a dream, I thought. I mean it was kind of scary looking and made me cringe, but if it was a vegetarian then it should be safe, right? At least I assumed so.

Whether it was or not, we had walked far enough that the bush it was eating from was blocking it before I could manage to point it out to Anna. I never saw another one after that.

“Some of the bushes have berries.” I told Anna. “I just saw one back there.”

“Yeah, there are some up ahead too.” she said in agreement. “We can pick some on the way back for Dr. Gershawn to test.”

“We could pick them now, in case we don’t see them on the way back.”

“Do you want to carry them the whole time, Callie?” she asked. “Besides, they might go bad quickly, in which case they’d spoil before we got back for her to test them.”

“Good point.” I agreed.

“Besides,” she added. “If they are poisonous then we may accidentally get poisoned while picking them, and it would be better to be heading back to the clearing if that happens.”

I conceded her point, glad that she thought of that. I should have. There were a lot of things I should have thought of, though. If I had taken the appropriate actions at any number of points then the crew of the Freedom would be dead now.

After talking about the berries, we didn’t speak for a while. Maybe an hour or more. The woods were more and more beautiful as we went. The weird, arching trees were becoming more common, and with that it brought some interesting combinations of shapes. In one place there were three trees arched together, forming a weird interlocking design that we took time to stop and examine.

In another place, there were four arching trees that almost met in a center point, where one of the spiral trees rose up. It created an almost giant flower design, which was very pretty.

There were more bushes starting to show up, too. Some of them were low and spread out, some were tall and concentrated, but all were various shades of red or blue.

The one thing that was still lacking were animals. Other than the handful of squirrel creatures, the rabbit, and that odd snake, we hadn’t seen anything. I would have expected larger animals to appear at some point. I would have even expected some kind of bird, or insect life. Nothing, though. With the planet so conducive to life, and especially with the life forms we’d already seen, I would have thought there would be more. There should have been more.

“Let’s stop for the night.” Anna suggested.

“It’s not even mid day.” I told her. “We should go on for a while.”

“Is that an order, Captain?” she asked, though her mouth was

curled in a smile. "I'm just tired, and I'd like to have dinner early."

"Well..." I glanced around. "I guess so. But let's go on until we find a decent sized clearing, okay? Something big enough we can spread out and see around us enough to feel a little safer."

It only took a few moments to find a nice flat spot with fifteen or twenty meters between trees. We cleaned up enough rocks and debris to spread our blankets across the ground. We stopped and had our small sandwiches, then gathered rocks and scraps of wood so we could start a fire nearby later in the evening.

We spent the evening listening to the breeze blowing the leaves and bushes. There were still no sounds from animals or insects. I worried, at least somewhat, that the wildlife would come out at night. But as night fell, and we sat there chatting in the darkening light, it seemed less likely all the time.

By the time it was entirely dark it was getting so cold that our additional layers of clothing, huddling together, and scrunching closely to the fire weren't enough to keep us warm. We covered up with our blankets and held close to each other.

"Do you think we're safe?" I asked Anna.

"I don't know. I haven't seen much to suggest otherwise, at least. Other than maybe getting cold, but we knew that before we headed out."

"How, um, do... I mean do you think the fire will burn all night?"

"I've never had an open fire like this before. Maybe."

"I hope so." I mumbled.

"Don't worry, Callie, I'll protect you from the dark."

I have always been so embarrassed about being afraid of the dark. I had never been insanely so, but it had always bothered me.

"My gosh, I'm so tired!" Anna said, wiggling around to get comfortable.

"Me too. We should probably try to get some rest. Goodnight, Anna. I love you."

"Goodnight, Captain." she replied.

That was all she said. She did not respond to my proclamation of feelings. Again.

I tried to shake it from my head, and I almost managed. Almost. I tried to think hard of a time when she ever said she cared about me the same as I did her, and I couldn't come up with any.

As my mind let go of the confusion and doubt about Anna's feelings, I found myself staring restlessly up into the sky. I imagined my parents floating away, clutching to each other as they flailed. As I watched them drift off to their deaths. As I promised God that I'd be a good girl if they could come back.

At some point I drifted off, because I remember dreaming about finding my parents there on the moon. I remember them stumbling into the camp, taking a seat at the fire. I remember Dad looking over at me and smiling.

"Daddy, do you like Anna?" I asked him.

"Anna is a nice girl." Mom said.

"Daddy?" I implored, wanting nothing more than his approval.

"Eww! Go change your wet pants, Liddy!" he said, his face scrunching up in disgust.

I woke with a start and stared up at the stars. My eyes were gushing tears, and I moved the blanket up over my head as I wiped at them. Despite being so near to the fire, it was very cold. I curled close to Anna, who was snoring softly, and tried to think of happy things to distract me while I went back to sleep.

—

We woke at dawn— or what passed for dawn on that moon. The fire had completely died, and it was still very cold. It was warming, but still cold.

"I was wondering when you'd wake up." Anna said.

"Sorry." I said, apologizing for something I didn't really feel I needed to apologize for.

"It's okay. I just need to pee and I didn't want to wander off and leave you alone."

"Oh, right, sorry. You can go now."

"Are you kidding me? It's cold out there, I'm not going. Go get some wood and get that fire going again so I can warm up first."

"Uh... sure, okay." I said, shocked that she would even ask me to do that, given that I was her commanding officer. But then, I had told them rank didn't matter anymore.

"I'm just teasing you, Callie," she said. She slid up out of the blankets. "I'll be right back, and I'll bring some wood to get the fire running again."

"Um... 'kay."

Despite her claiming she'd get the fire going when she got back, I slid out and began doing it instead. I was cold and I needed some warmth. It only took a moment and the coals had lit the new scraps of wood blazing away. The light from it glowed a greenish, garish color, and it smelled horrid. A fleeting thought passed, a fear that the nasty smelling smoke could be poisonous.

"I brought more wood." Anna's voice broke into my thoughts. "I see you got the fire up. Cold breakfast or hot?"

"It's easier to eat it cold and get moving."

"Your wish is my command, Captain," she said, actually saluting as she laughed.

We chewed on the dried fruit and granola that we had in our packs, and sipped at our drinks— me at water, Anna at a cold coffee. And as soon as we were finished, we packed up and were away on our journey.

"This place is amazing in the morning." I noticed.

It was true. With the sunlight flickering through the trees lighting up the leaves of the trees as if they were ablaze, to the mist hanging in the air, to the faint glow of the occasional set of eyes we could see in the underbrush, it was all beautiful.

"It's getting warmer, too." Anna said, nodding to my statement. "How long do you think we'll have to walk?"

"If we don't find anything by later today we'll probably need to turn back. We don't have enough food or water for more than three more days, and I don't want to risk running out by staying away too long. I'd rather keep a reserve to carry back."

"That sounds like a good idea, then." she agreed.

And we walked. And walked. At one point in the day I tried to grasp her hand, but she continued to swing it freely, seeming to be trying to avoid it.

"Is that a stream?" Anna asked me, sometime around midday. "I believe so." I said.

I had heard it trickling a moment earlier, but hadn't seen it until just then. Maybe her height advantage let her see it first, I don't know, but it annoyed me that she had noticed it first.

"Are those the plants?" I asked her.

"It looks like it." she replied.

There they were, on the opposite shore, looking larger and larger as we got nearer. The bluish-green plants, with their bright orange and yellow flowers covered a twenty meter long patch along the bank of the stream. It was a massive find. We would carry back all we could with us, and make notes of the location so the rest could be collected in the future.

Even though the day had gotten quite warm by then, the water was freezing as it washed over our feet. The stream was barely ankle deep, but it had quickly soaked through our shoes as we walked across it.

Anna and I pulled our folded collection bags from our packs, then began digging in the gray dirt, loosening the plants from the soil so that we could rid them of their roots to carry back with us. It took at least an hour for Anna to have her bag full, and I had only filled mine halfway, when my ears perked up at a sound in the distance.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered.

She nodded. I felt bad for being disappointed by that, but I was. I had hoped she wouldn't nod, that it had only been my imagination. But I also was excited. None of the animals we had seen before then made any sounds above a scratching in the trees or an occasional light huff of breath.

Whatever was out there was bigger.

Anna and I moved to the edge of the bushes on that bank, hoping to sneak a peek at whatever was making the noise. I expected whatever it was to be large, and I was okay with that. Whatever it was sounded far away– or at least far enough we'd have time to make an escape. Hopefully.

I was *not* prepared for what I saw when I peered through the orange branches of the dense bush.

A fence.

Yes, a fence.

I couldn't believe my eyes. A fence! And a path! A small path of crushed rock was leading between two lines of wooden fencing. The fence looked like the wood, a deep pink, and was made up of evenly spaced posts, maybe half a meter apart, that were not connected by cross bars. And along the edge on one side was a line of flowering bushes that had clearly been well maintained and trimmed.

"This can't be real." Anna whispered.

That was mirroring my thoughts exactly. The fence ran hundreds of meters into the distance, disappearing over a small hill, where it seemed to head toward two high stone pillars that were still visible over the hill.

"What made the noise?" I asked her.

"I don't know, I don't see anything."

And then there was a bird floating in the distance, too far off to see very well. It was way off, and did not seem large enough to have made the kind of deep, guttural sound we had heard before.

And then off to the side came a loud grunting, followed by several deep u sounds, which was followed by something that sounded slightly like a deep bass yodel. Anna and I jumped to our feet and spun to see it.

"Run!" Anna shouted.

I turned and followed Anna as she sprinted away, across the stream and back in the direction of our clearing. The gravity rate being lower than we were used to made the running easier, but the thinner than used to air made it harder. Still, we managed continue running for several minutes, stealing glances back over our shoulders.

We weren't being pursued. At least I didn't think so. I shouted out to Anna to slow down. She had pulled ahead of me by fifty meters during our escape, but she waited for me as I caught up.

"What *was* that?" she asked, panting and nearly in tears.

"I don't know." I admitted. "It didn't seem... like, wild, or anything."

"What did you see?" she asked.

What had I seen? It was hard to remember exactly, fear and adrenaline clouding my memory like it was. What I think I had seen, and what I described to her, was a large, hulking creature. A creature maybe three meters high when it stood upright. A creature with thin, translucent gray skin that you could faintly see its internals through. A creature standing on three legs, with two arms and a very large, lopsided head and a mouth large enough to nearly cover my own head.

"That's insane." Anna said. "It's insane, right?"

"Yeah." I agreed, huffing out a breath.

We continued jogging into the night, afraid. I didn't want to stop, but eventually we had to.

"Can we even risk a fire?" Anna said. "What if that thing comes after us in the night? It could see the fire and come for us."

"Or we could die of hypothermia." I told her. "We have to risk it. I didn't see anything following us, anyway."

"Or anyone?" she asked. "Was that a... a... I can't believe I'm even thinking of asking, but was that—"

"An alien?" I suggested. She nodded. "Technically, no."

"What do you mean tech—"

"We're the aliens here." I explained. "And if that thing has the same... or even greater intelligence than us... well, that doesn't make it the alien. We're the aliens here, Anna."

"I didn't look at it like that." she said.

"And if they are as smart as us then maybe they already knew we were here." I continued. "And if so, maybe they already know we're no threat."

"Or maybe they know we *are* a threat, and they are avoiding us completely because of it."

"Maybe," I agreed. "But we really aren't that much of a threat to them. We have a couple of weapons back at the clearing, but not many."

"Do they know that?" she asked.

"I have no idea what they do or don't know, Anna. Let's just try to get some rest so we can get back to the others early tomorrow."

"Yeah, okay."

We gathered wood and made a small fire, bedding down next to it. I curled up next to her and tried not to show precisely how terrified I was.

"I'll protect you as much as I can, Callie." she said.

"We'll be fine." I assured her. "They didn't even follow us. Now goodnight, Anna."

"Goodnight."

"I love you."

I drifted to sleep that night, wondering why it was that Anna never responded when I told her that. I just couldn't be sure exactly how she felt about me, and it hurt to be so full of doubt.

—

In the morning we hurried past the arched trees, past the area we had seen the snake creature, past the curly trees and toward the area where the forest began to thin out.

And then into the clearing.

I could see the others working on the cabin as we burst forth. At first they hadn't seen us, but as we covered the distance at a full jog, we caught first Svetlana's eye, and when she called out to us, that of the others.

"Hey there, Callie," Robby yelled out. "Did you find any of the—"

"What's wrong?" Bao shouted out. "Did something happen?"

"We are not alone!" Anna screamed to them.

"What the hell does that mean?" Shauna asked. She was sitting on top of the short fledgeling wall of our shelter.

"Are you being chased?" Robby shouted, reaching into a waist pouch he had, bringing out a gun. "What kind of creature am I looking for?" he asked.

Anna and I came to a panting stop before the others. I'm not even sure what point that morning we began to run again, but we were in a massive hurry to get back to the safety of the others.

"What's going on here?" Dr. Gershawn asked. She had emerged from the tent and was heading our way. "Did you get our roots?"

"Y-yeah." I panted, tossing the bag down near her feet.

“There’s a bunch more where that came from, but I don’t know if it’s safe.”

“Well why wouldn’t it–”

“Aliens.” Anna told her.

“What?” she asked, eyes darting around the clearing behind us.

“Did–”

“Not aliens,” I said. “Natives. Maybe.”

“Did you come into contact with them?” Dr. Gershawn asked.

“Not physically.” I told her.

Anna and I went on to explain, describing our entire encounter and what we had seen, taking turns as we added details.

“Let’s go have some lunch.” Dr. Gershawn told us. “You two didn’t have much chance to eat or get much to drink yesterday, I’d imagine.”

“We have to decide what the hell to do about–” Shauna began.

“We’ll do better working on that while we have full bellies, Miss Cook.” the doctor said.

We convened around the cook stove in the tent, Robby staying at the door to keep his eyes out for trouble as we all talked.

“They don’t sound too threatening.” Kre said, finally. “Did they come across as aggressive.”

“Yes!” Anna said quickly.

“No.” I said, feeling bad for disagreeing. “Actually, if I would say anything about it, I’d say it seemed to be curious. It never chased us, and it never even vocalized loudly toward us.”

That led to a long discussion about how to handle these new people. And the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that they were people. Not animals. Not creatures. People.

Intelligent life.

Humans had dreamed of finding intelligent life since the first time they looked up at the night sky. Maybe longer. We had found it.

“How do you want to handle it, Captain?” Bao asked.

“No, not captain, remember.” I said. I had flashbacks of all the ways I had screwed up and gotten people killed, and I did not want to do that here.

“If there ever was a time we needed centralized leadership,

Callie, this is it.” Gina Preston told me.

“I agree.” Bao said.

“Well that doesn’t mean I have to make all the decisions.” I said. “What do you think we should do?”

“We should go back and check them out.” Chief Kouri suggested. “Just scout around the outside, being careful not to be seen.”

“Yes,” Ailanna Pok agreed. “We need to study them so we know what we’re dealing with.”

“And maybe make contact at that point?” Anna said.

“But some should stay behind.” Bao suggested. “To prepare in case we have to defend ourselves, and to split us up so all of humanity can’t be destroyed in one fell swoop.”

“I can’t believe we’re thinking of doing this shit.” Shauna said. “Hell, what do we do if they attack us?”

“Run.” I said.

“We don’t know shit about them, though.

Maybe they can outrun us. Maybe they’ll catch us and tie us up and roast us alive to eat later.”

“Miss Cook,” Dr. Gershawn scolded. “You are scaring Sveta.”

Svetlana wasn’t the only one she was scaring. Though I hadn’t seen any indication that they were even carnivores, let alone that they would eat another intelligent being, it was still a scary thought. And really, we had no clue what to think of the people yet. It was very smart to be afraid.

“So who goes and who stays?” Kre asked.

They were all looking at me again, waiting for me to make a decision on that. Because, ya know, I was the only one who had a valid point of view, apparently.

“Um, does anyone have any ideas?” I asked.

“Well, I’ll go,” Bao said. “And I’ll probably take this one with me,” she said, indicating Kouri. “I’d also like Debartolo and... Cook, you up for a little trip?”

“Hell no.” she said. “I ain’t going nowhere.”

“Shauna, you really need to do your part to help out on this.” Pok told her.

“Shut your damn mouth, bitch.” Shauna responded.

“Don’t call me a bitch, you crazy little twit!” Pok shouted.

“What are you going to do about it, *bitch*?!” Shauna said.

“Enough!” I shouted over both of them.

Sometimes I really didn't like Shauna's mouth. Why had I brought her along, anyway? Her attitude was always like a cancer for our group, and I should have seen that before I selected her. Instead she continued to drag us down. It was never overwhelming, just things like her not wanting to work very hard when we were rolling the logs for the shelter, or not wanting to take her turn to cook.

"I'm going," I said, standing up. "Anna, Duval, Kre and Preston are coming along."

"That's not a good idea." Shauna said. "You're taking our security officer with you."

"It's the end of the conversation, Shauna." I said.

I left the tent. If the aliens came then they could come, as far as I was concerned. At that point I really didn't care. They could drag me away if they want, I thought. At least I'd be done worrying about everyone.

Not that I'd ever be that lucky.

Instead I spent the rest of the evening helping everyone plan for all contingencies. That, and watch as Anna sat over close to Shauna, talking so quietly that I couldn't hear what they were talking about. All I knew was that both would suddenly giggle, and sometimes Anna would blush and look down. I couldn't help but feel jealous.

"We'll head out first thing tomorrow." I told the crew. "We'll stop halfway there to camp, then make contact the next day. We'll need to be prepared."

"Good plan." Bao said, nodding. "Go in early the second day, giving plenty of time to deal with whatever happens before it gets too cold overnight. If you have to run, you'll have a chance to put some distance between you and them before you have to stop for the night."

"Hopefully it won't come to that." I said.

"Well kiddo, I'm not sure we should put all of humanity on just the hope that they won't attack."

She was right, and I knew it. What would we even do if they attacked, anyway? We had no weapons— or almost none. We had very little ability to fight against a species that was three meters high and looked much stronger than us.

Chapter Three

Just after dawn we approached the stream. Robby had a gun at his side, and as he stepped into the cool water he put his hand against it, ready to use it if need be. The rest of us followed him, unarmed.

“Do *not* pull that gun out unless you need to, Chief.” I ordered him. “We don’t want to look aggressive.”

He nodded in agreement and confirmation of my order. He knew as well as I did that the easiest way to wind up in a fight is to provoke them by doing anything that could be considered a threat.

“This was where we saw it.” Anna told the others, indicating the bushes in front of us.

“Great.” Chief Preston said. “So, uh, while we’re all still alive and kicking, I’m glad I got to come along with you.” She coughed and looked around. “Even if it means we die in the process.”

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather die with.” Kre told us all. “Well, you know what I mean.” She shrugged.

I understood their feelings, but I wasn’t in the mood to die that day, if it was at all possible to avoid. Still, it would be better to know whether something awful was coming or not as soon as we possibly could.

“Here we go, people.” I said, as I stepped toward the bushes.

“No!” Anna said loudly. “I’ll go first.”

“I’ll—”

“No, Callie.” Kre said. “Let her go first.”

“I can go fi—”

“No, they’re right.” Robby said. “You should stay behind the rest of us.”

“There’s no reason for me to—”

“Yes, there is.” Preston told me. “Please listen, Callie.”

I nodded in agreement, though it felt wrong to let someone

else put themselves at risk instead of me. If someone was going to be attacked I wanted it to be me. After all, I was the reason we were stuck there in the first place.

The others shared a look, then Robby stepped through the bushes. The rest of us followed, stepping into the area of the clearing that held the path and fence.

There were no creatures in sight, not even a simple bird in the air, not even one of those snake creatures picking at the bushes. Along one side of the fence lined path I now saw that there was a garden, with a small stone trough carrying water along the ground for irrigation.

“This place is amazing.” Kre said.

And it was. With the glowing fields of red and orange grasses, to the gray crushed stone of the path, to the stone irrigation trough, it was all beautiful.

“Orders, Captain?” Robby asked.

“Um... let’s just go check that path, I guess.”

As we walked, the group seemed to circle around me, protecting me for whatever reason. I wondered what it was that made them so protective– or made listen to me at all, for that matter.

As we moved toward the beginning of the rock path I could see that it wasn’t really the beginning, it actually continued on at an angle away from us, we just hadn’t been able to see it before because of our angle and the way the ground rolled slightly away from us in that direction.

We got to the path and everyone sort of paused. There was a collective deep breath among us. When we headed down that path there was a very high probability that we would come in direct contact with the aliens. The natives.

A bird chirped in the distance. I turned my head to the side to see it, and was amazed. Not a bird– at least not in the sense that I knew of them. The thing had a long body, very thin and sort of reminiscent of the snake creature I had seen before, and it seemed to have long wavy membranes along its side, not like regular wings but more like a wavy flap of skin that ran all the way down their sides.

“Callie,” Anna said. “The path.”

I turned my eyes back in the direction of the path to see what had drawn her interest. There in the distance, nearly as far off as the two large pillars, was one of the natives.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s get moving.”

We walked, the rock path crunching beneath our feet, in the direction of the pillars. The direction the creature was. I could see that it was approaching us at the same time we were approaching it. Its three legged walk seemed awkward to me, but it was moving along at a speed that looked to be greater than ours.

“They’re huge!” Preston noted.

“Try not to show any fear.” I told the group. “We don’t know how it’ll react to that.”

“What if it attacks us?” Anna asked. “Do we fight back, or run?”

“Run. Definitely.” I answered.

Before long the creature was joined by several others of its kind, all just as large and with that same awkward way of walking, all with that lopsided head– though some were lopsided one direction and some to the other.

One of the creatures in the back was covered in a huge, dark blue robe. It wasn’t until that point that I realized that the others were basically naked, only having a fringe skirt draping from their waists.

I could feel my legs trembling as we got close to the nearest creature. I could now see more details, make out hints of the bones and organs through its semi-transparent skin. Its eyes were very small for the size of its head– at least when compared to us. It didn’t have any earlobes visible, and no hair to cover them if they had been there. And the nose was large, nearly the size of my palm, resembling a pig snout, except there were three nostrils and it stuck out only two or three centimeters from its face.

We stopped when our group was about a meter from the creature. We all just stared at it, and it stared back at us. The other creatures continued on toward us as the one directly in front of us stared us down, making quiet huffing sounds through its nose.

The other creatures reached us and came to a stop. The one in the blue robe had dry, wrinkled skin visible where it was not covered by the robe. It, and only it, had a slight amount of hair jutting from the top of its head. It also had hair coming down the side of its face, almost all the way to its chin. It looked like a beard that had been shaved only at the very tip of its chin. The hair was a dark brown, with streaks of orange through it.

He— and I assumed it was male because of the beard— was also carrying a large staff, which had a huge crystal at the tip. The staff reached from the ground up over the head of the creature, and he held it in his left hand. The robe had symbols on it, with a white trim, and looked to me to be religious in some way.

That one, the robed one, stepped next to the one nearest us. At that point, the other grunted and opened its mouth, letting loose a guttural string of noises that I thought was their way of talking. The robed one shouted it down, barking out a loud and booming sound that silenced it immediately.

And then the robed one stepped toward us, using the staff almost like a cane.

“Don’t move.” Robby mumbled to us.

“I think I peed myself.” Kre responded.

The robed creature... person... native, stepped next to Robby and looked sideways at him, then turned his large head toward Kre, then myself, then Anna, and lastly to Preston. It tilted its head down close to Robby and sniffed loudly, then repeated the process with Kre.

“Gurbulluchuuun.” It said softly, stepping toward the small gap between Kre and Robby, toward me.

“Don’t.” I said to Anna, who had leaned my way as if she were going to move between it and me.

He leaned in close to me and sniffed, then stopped and looked carefully at me, his eyes narrowing. Then he turned and glanced at Anna, then Preston, then recentered his gaze on me.

“Ugulluruumusuuuun.” It said, its tone going up at the end as if it were asking a question.

It seemed to be waiting for a response, but I had no idea what it had said or what it was expecting from me. I very lightly shrugged.

“*Ugulluruumusuuuun?*” he repeated, clearly a question this time. His hand came up and he pointed a long, bony finger at my chest. “*Ugulluruumusuuuun.*” he said.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t understand.” I told it.

My voice sounded weak to me, and it wasn’t until then that I realized just how afraid I was. But I managed to maintain eye contact with him, and he made a gesture as if to sigh, then he pointed to me again, repeating the word, then he pointed to each of the others and said something completely different.

“Is he asking if you are a child?” Preston asked.

“He’s asking if I’m the leader.” I said, suddenly certain of what he was saying. “Yes, I am the leader.” I told him.

“How do you know that’s what he—”

“I just do.” I mumbled.

The robed native stood up to his full height, towering above us. He looked around at his people, then slouched back down to meet my eyes.

“*Uuuu-mon.*” he said.

“Holy...” Preston said. “Did it just say—”

“Human.” I said, agreeing with him. “I am human.”

“Uh!” he barked, tilting his head back and making a sound that I can only describe as similar to paper ripping. “*Uuuu-mon!*” he shouted, a smile covering his wide mouth.

“Human.” I repeated, smiling.

The other natives were nearer now, and some of them seemed a little more relaxed, now that the robed one was obviously more relaxed as well.

“*Kuuuuug!*” the robed one said, pounding a fist harshly against his own chest. “*Kuuuuug.*”

“*Kuuuuug?*” I said, repeating his word as closely as I could.

“*Kuuuuug.*” he said, pointing to one of the other native creatures.

He then repeated it for each of them, pointing to all six who had now gathered near us. He then pounded on his chest again.

“Kuura Pa.” he said, repeating it again as he pounded his chest. He then stared at me, waiting.

“Kuura Pa.” I said.

“Klanduuul.” he said, pointing to another of them.

“Klanduuul.” I repeated.

We continued like this, him pointing to each of the others– Elu, Chal, Ikendruuull, Uuullulu and Roshululanduruu. He then pointed at me.

“Callie.” I said, touching my own chest. “Callie.”

“Cuuu-luuu.” he said.

“Callie.” I said again.

“Cuuul-a?” he asked.

“Close enough.” I mumbled, smiling.

“This is unbelievable.” Kre said, when I pointed to her.

“Ashley.” I said. “Ashley.”

“Ass-ee?” he said.

That brought a chuckle from all of us. It seemed confused, and I worried that it would be offended that we were laughing at it, but it seemed to laugh along with us.

“Ashley.” I repeated.

“Ass-ee.” he said, not seeming to be able to form the correct sound.

“Great, I’m going to be known as assy.” Kre said. “Wonderful.”

“Robby.” I said, moving on and pointing toward Chief Duval. “Robby.”

“Ruuub-ee?”

“Anna.” I said, pointing to her.

“Aaanuu-eee.”

“That’s good enough for me.” Anna said, smiling.

“Gina.” I said, pointing at Chief Preston.

“Eeee-na?” he asked.

I nodded and he started pointing at each of us, calling out his version of each of our names as he did so. He let out one of those laughs again. I copied his process, pointing at each and repeating their names. He smiled and laughed again.

He moved from directly in front of me and turned back toward the twin stone pillars in the distance. He walked along, waving his

staff our direction. He and the others walked away from us, then he stopped down the path and waved the staff again.

“He wants us to follow.” I said.

“How do you know?” Robby asked. “How can you even remotely understand any of what that thing says?”

“I can just tell. It’s not that hard.” I explained.

“Everything sounds like a bunch of grunts to me.” Kre said.

“Well, except assy.”

“My bigger question is how they knew we were human.” I said.

“Well they can just look at us and see.” Anna told me. “We’re obviously not one of whatever they are.”

“Kuuuuug.” I reminded her.

“Right, well, the one with the robe–”

“Kuura Pa.” I told her.

“Kuura Pa... he seems like a... I don’t know, king or something.”

“I actually think he’s a priest or holy man of some kind.” I said.

“It could be that they just heard some of our radio signals.”

Chief Preston pointed out.

That sounded more like it. I don’t know if anyone had mentioned the word human over the radio, but it’s very possible. Especially since we were the last human beings alive, and had discussed that a lot.

It hadn’t even occurred to me that Kuura Pa could be a king. I had to consider if Anna could be correct on that. Something about it didn’t feel right, but it was possible I thought.

The stone pillars were much taller than we thought. As we approached them I was in awe. They were gigantic! Maybe seventy meters tall, and as big as five meters across at the bottom, which we hadn’t been able to see before because the land before them sloped down dramatically. But as we topped that hill and could see just how large they were, we could also see that a busy city laid on the other side of them.

The city seemed like a booming metropolis, but made up entirely of single story buildings. It looked to be kilometers across. It really was massive.

“Why didn’t we think of that?” Chief Preston asked.

Most of the buildings were not logs, and not brick– though I saw a handful of both in the city. Most of the structures seemed to be made of mud, formed into walls, and most had wooden roofing.

Kuura Pa made a loud sound, rambled something out, then waved us to follow. We did so, stepping between the stone pillars a moment later. By that time there were many other natives gathered around the path, looking at us with what I thought was joy on their faces.

The path widened to cover most of the available land that didn't contain a building. There was a widened avenue through the center of the city, and the path we were on became that avenue.

We followed Kuura Pa down the avenue, and we soon started noticing wheeled wooden carts being pulled by large creatures that sort of resembled trunkless elephants, except with a large hump on their backs.

Some of the people who were coming out to see us had clothing on, though not all, and none of those were as fancy as the robes that Kuura Pa wore. I wondered if they were heads of their homes, or the women, or what.

“Uuuu-mon.” some would say in a voice that sounded something like awe.

Only once did we come across a group that seemed angry. Kuura Pa shouted them down, but they were looking at us with clear contempt, and shouting at us. Luckily those with us moved between us and them, so we were not in any danger from them.

We came to a gigantic fountain in a wide plaza. It had small statues of animals all around its base, and it sprayed red water up in intricate patterns. The sound of the lapping water and the intermittent patterns were so peaceful and serene.

After a long walk, perhaps all the way to the center of the city, Kuura Pa showed us to a large building. It was very different than the other buildings on the outside. It had large stones that made up its walls, and it was very tall and immense in comparison to the other buildings we had seen.

“A church.” I said.

“You can’t be sure.” Kre pointed out. “It could be their government building.”

“No, it’s a church.” I told her.

It seemed obvious to me. There were ornate carvings in many of the stones, some of which to me appeared very religious in nature. There were people around the front, some wearing little necklaces with a stone carving as a charm, and some of them were on their knees and looking up at the building. It just all read as very religious to me, not governmental.

“Maybe it’s both.” Robby pointed out. “Didn’t some ancient cultures have a religious core? All their laws and rules, all their leaders, all of it came from the religion, right?”

“True.” I agreed. “It could be.”

But once inside it seemed even more clear to me. There were long rows of seating– backless stone benches– filling the main room. At the front was a raised area, presumably for the priest to give his sermon from.

“Cuuul-a,” Kuura Pa said, breaking into a long run of words that I didn’t understand.

I did understand his arm waving us to follow, though, and we did so, walking through the main aisle of the church.

It was beautiful. Brightly colored blue walls, with torch lights all along the walls, and a glass ceiling. A glass ceiling seemed like such a remarkable thing, considering how primitive their culture seemed.

The next room, which was separated by a curtain, was a smaller room with large padded seats that resembled sofas. The room had a low, wooden ceiling and the floor was coated in a thick animal fur of some kind. The walls were lined with shelves that were so full that they threatened to spill over.

Kuura Pa motioned for us to have a seat, and we did so.

“Uuuu-mon.” he said, smiling and laughing that odd laugh. “Yes, we’re humans.” I agreed.

He babbled along in their language as he moved about the

room. Once I started to stand, but he smiled and motioned me back down. After a moment he made a sound of delight, then moved back in front of us. He was holding something that looked very familiar.

“Is that a—” Kre began.

“Tablet.” I responded.

He was holding one of our tablets. I had no idea how he had gotten it, and my mind ran through several scenarios, which ranged from the ridiculous— Freedom beating us here and crashing somewhere nearby— to the absurd— they managed to create a tablet *exactly* like the ones our ship had.

“Uuuu-mon.” Kuura Pa said, holding the tablet out to me.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

He rambled on and on, and it was clear that he enjoyed whatever it was he was saying, but I didn’t understand a word of it.

“Does it turn on?” Anna asked.

I handed it to her and she tried the power, but it didn’t come up. It was clearly one of our tablets though. I wasn’t sure how they got it, but it came from our ship.

“Uuuu-mon.” Kuura Pa said again.

“I don’t understand.” I told him.

“We need to find a way to communicate with them.” Chief Preston said.

“Maybe that’s why he gave you the tablet.” Kre said, pointing to it. “Maybe there is something on there that will help.”

“But where would something like that come from?” Robby asked.

“No clue.” she answered. “Just thinking out loud.”

“Could we come up with software to communicate with them?” I asked, also thinking out loud. “I know a lot about systems, and I can write a program here and there, but I don’t know about figuring out how to translate language.”

“I don’t think any of us do.” Preston told me. “I think we’re going to have to find another way.”

But even as we were talking, Kuura Pa was ahead of us. He had a tablet of paper and was drawing with a chunk of something blue. When I noticed him he was almost finished, and when he did he

held it out to me.

“Uuuu-mon.” he said, pointing to us and to one group of crude figures.

“Human, yes.” I said, nodding.

“Uuuu-mon.” he repeated, this time pointing to another group of crude figures.

“Yes there are more of us back at...”

But before I finished speaking it hit me what it was he was saying. There were more humans here before us.

“Humans?” I asked, pointing at the other group.

“Uuuu-mon.” he said in agreement.

My legs went weak and I fell back onto the seat. My heart was racing and I couldn’t breathe. It took several moments for my brain to come to terms with what I already knew.

“Callie!” Anna shouted.

She was shaking me, and the others were all standing. I must have blanked out for a moment, lost in my thoughts of what this would mean for us and for humanity.

“There were people here before us.” I told them. “That’s where the tablet came from.”

“That’s impossible!” Kre said loudly. “Nobody from Freedom could have possibly—”

“Before Freedom, then.” I said. I stood back up and turned to Kuura Pa. “Are they still here?” I asked.

He did not seem to understand, and I was trying very hard to figure out how to communicate to him what I was asking. I finally settled for pointing to the other humans on his drawing, then to my eye, then around us. I didn’t think it would work, but he surprisingly seemed to understand it.

He rambled along for a long time, and when he noticed we were not understanding he pointed to the sky.

“Uuuu-mon.” he said.

“They came from the sky?” I asked.

He babbled on again for a long time, then mimed a ship floating down to the ground, then pointed to the others on the picture. Then he put his hand over the others and slowly mimicked a ship taking off.

“They left.” I said. “Great. Where to?”

We couldn’t understand any of what he was saying, but I got the idea that they left peacefully. It seemed they left as friends. He kept pointing at the tablet and talking, then pointing to his ear.

“I think he’s saying the tablet will translate.” Kre told me. “Callie, we need to figure out how to get that thing turned on.”

“I think you may be right.” I said. “Do you think it just needs charged?”

“It looks to be in good shape, so maybe.”

“Can we bring a charger here, you think?”

“We’d need a generator as well.” Chief Preston chimed in. “It would be easier to take it to our shuttle.”

“Our ship.” I corrected, knowing I’ve referred to it as a shuttle plenty of times since it was officially given status as a small, independent vessel. “Yes, we should take it to our ship. And we can bring the others with us when we come back.”

“Are you sure that is wise?” Robby asked. “To put us all at risk at one time?”

“Face it, Chief, we’re so outnumbered that if they wanted to wipe us out they could.” Kre said.

“That’s true.” he agreed, seeming to consider what she said. “I’d want us to be well armed, at least.”

“I agree.” I said. “But we’d have to do so in a way that didn’t look threatening. And I have to figure out a way to explain all this to Kuura Pa.”

I spent ten minutes trying to ask if we could take the tablet, and try to explain that we’d be back in a few days, but I was getting nowhere.

“Let me try.” Kre said.

“Go for it.”

She pointed at the paper he had and made a sign like writing, asking if she could use his paper. He handed her the paper and the blue greasy pencil he had been writing with. She drew a circle and made a lot of stick figures on it, pointing to it and sweeping her hands

around. Then she drew a smaller circle that was clearly supposed to be the sun and pointed to it, then up at the sky.

“How many days?” she asked.

“Uh... probably three.” I said.

Kre pointed to the sun on the picture, then motioned overhead, miming it moving through the sky. She then held up three fingers.

He responded by babbling on in his language again, then pointed to the tablet and waved his hand, I thought telling us to take the tablet and go.

We said our goodbyes, hoping he’d understand a little at least, then head out of the building. In the street were hundreds of the natives, of the Kuuuuug, all waiting for us to exit. But at least they were leaving a wide opening in the road for us to walk.

“Cuuul-a,” I heard. I spun and saw Kuura Pa standing in the door of the church. “Cuuul-a.” he said again, holding a hand up in a very human looking gesture that did not look natural to him at all.

I waved back with a smile, and the crowd around us broke into a cheer. It was a little weird to hear, but these people truly did seem to be welcoming and happy we were there.

We made our way out of the city, and back into the woods. It seemed like a very long walk back to our ship, but we were all so excited to have made contact with an intelligent species that was clearly peaceful.

When we stopped that night we all bedded down around a fire. None of us were able to get to sleep for a very long time, but we eventually did.

—

It was early the next day when we wandered into the clearing. Everyone was surprised to see us so soon.

Even more surprised when we told them how our meeting went.

“Let me see that thing.” Bao said, eyes locked on the tablet, as

they had been almost since the moment we had arrived.

As she turned the tablet over and over, letting out several sharp breaths as she did, Shauna continued to quiz us – mostly Anna – about the Kuuuuug.

“I think now is a good time to take Sveta in for her afternoon snack.” Dr. Gershawn said. “If you’d excuse me, Captain.” she said.

I nodded, still not happy that they insisted that I be in charge, even when there was no direct action needed and no reason to have a single person in charge.

“Son of a bitch!” Bao barked. “Son of a bitch!” she repeated.

“What is it?” Anna asked.

“Callie,” Bao said, excitement filling her eyes. “This is one of the original batches of tablets, I think.” she told me.

“And that excites you?” I asked, wondering why she’d be so happy that it was really old and unlikely to work.

“You’re damn right it does!” she exclaimed. “This didn’t come from Freedom.” she said, pointing at the tablet.

“Didn’t we already know that, Bao?” Preston asked.

“I’m saying–”

“It sure looks like it was made by humans.” I said. “Kuura Pa said–”

“It looks *exactly* like ours!” she agreed.

“So it didn’t come from a human visitor?” Anna asked.

“Yes, it did!” she said.

“Bao, we already knew that it came from humans.” I said.

“But look!” she said, holding it out to me.

I looked, Anna looked, Kre looked, and even Chief Kouri looked. And we all saw the logo stamped into the back of the plastic, signifying that this particular tablet was manufactured for the United Nations Space Commission.

“So?” Kouri said. “The UNSC launched a lot of ships, I don’t see why–”

“Because the only ships to ever leave Earth orbit from UNSC were Freedom and her sister ships.” Bao said.

“So maybe later–”

“One of the other ships has been here?!” I asked.

“I think so, yes.” Bao agreed.

“That’s impossible.” Anna said. “They were sent different

directions entirely. And Callie, didn't you say they were all destroyed?"

"Apparently I was wrong?" I said. "But wait, Bao, how could they have beaten us here? Especially since they launched in different directions?"

"I have no damn clue, but they obviously did!" she replied. "Let's see if we can get this thing charged and find out who it came from."

She turned and trotted toward the tents, toward the Thumper. It would be necessary to use the Thumper's charging system. I wasn't sure at that point that we had even brought a charging cable along with us, but Bao found one.

The wait for the tablet to charge enough to turn on was agonizing. We had no clue if it would ever start, and if it would lead to any answers if it did. Eventually, though, the screen flickered.

"Do you want to do the honors?" Bao asked me.

"Go ahead." I told her.

She picked up the tablet and started to turn it on, but instead placed it back down before both of us before she brought the screen to life.

It opened to what appeared to be a message composer. The author was telling the recipient, Vlad, that they longed to be back in their bunk so they could nestle together and share body heat, and expressed how cold they had been. But the message had never been sent for some reason.

Bao closed that app and we were immediately presented with a screen of gibberish, interspersed with words in English.

A translator program.

I quickly scanned the page, then scrolled up. They had had a short stay with the Kuuuuug, followed by a break of weeks, followed by a stay that reached nearly a month. During that time they exchanged cultural information, talking about their differences and similarities, as well as discussing long-term living arrangements. In the end, for reasons not mentioned, the humans had planned to leave.

Why they left was a mystery, but Kuura Pa had made it clear

to us that they had left the planet. I just wondered if we would be able to use this software to communicate with the Kuuuuug and what they could tell us.

“It almost seems like there must have been several people talking to them with tablets, so maybe there are more?” Bao asked aloud. “That would explain why there are a lot of gaps in information here.”

“Is there any information anywhere about whose tablet it was?” Kre asked.

“Let me see...” Bao said, swiping through the screens. “Looks like it belonged to a Lieutenant Vlatka Alexin.”

Bao gasped and stepped back, stumbling. She looked around at the rest of us. She took a deep breath and seemed to swallow hard.

“Of the UNSC Bear.” she said.

“That’s not even possible.” I said. “Is it?”

“The Bear was destroyed a long time ago, I thought?” Anna said. “Callie, didn’t Captain Nelson say that? Didn’t he say the other ships were—”

“What’s the Bear?” Shauna asked.

We all looked at her, dumbstruck that she had no clue. But then, maybe she never studied why we were out here in the first place, never heard the ship names, despite Milton telling us himself that we were the last ship left.

“It was the transport ship for the Vitol.” I told her. “One of our sister ships.”

“One of Freedom’s sister ships.” Bao corrected.

“Yes, we’re crew of Thumper now.” I agreed.

The Bear survived somehow during the centuries? That was the implication of the tablet. That, or somehow a tablet from the Bear managed to make its way across the universe to our current location.

Either option seemed unlikely.

“How the hell did they survive all this time?” Bao asked. “They had no way to mine, no way to scan for available settlement locations, no probes to check for fuels and materials, to find planets and systems.”

“Maybe they didn’t.” Preston suggested. “It seems as likely that

somehow this tablet wound up here without the Bear or its crew.”

“I was thinking that.” I said.

“How?” Kouri asked. “It wouldn’t survive atmospheric entry.”

“And how would it just happen to have a program to interpret between the native people and humans?” Kre asked.

“That is a very good point.” I said. “I think we have to conclude that either the crew landed here– such as Kuura Pa seemed to suggest– or that they met with some of the Kuuuuug previously somewhere else, and the Kuuuuug brought it back.”

“I hadn’t considered that.” Bao said. “So how do we find out which it is?”

“We have to go back there.” Kre answered immediately. “We have to go back now that we can speak with them.”

“Captain?” Preston asked.

“Okay, first of all please stop calling me that.” I reminded them. “And second, I think she’s right.”

Chapter Four

I led the entire group, all twelve of us, back to the Kuuuuug's city. It had been two days since we had returned to the clearing, which meant we had hurriedly packed and headed out as soon as we could. Because of that, we missed packing enough food, and were very hungry.

As we headed up the crushed rock path, Bao and Ailanna Pok openly marveling at the sites they were seeing for the first time, we saw a small group of Kuuuuug wandering about the space near the stone pillars. Many of the Kuuuuug turned and hurried away, while the remaining three approached us, smiling and holding their left arms across their chest– I assume in a sign of welcome.

“Do they all have three legs?” Dr. Gershawn asked.
“Fascinating.”

“You have to wonder about the evolutionary processes that led to that.” Kouri noted. “Amazing.”

As the Kuuuuug neared, Svetlana began to whimper quietly in the back of our group. Anna slipped to the back and scooped her up in her arms, returning to the front near me.

“They aren't scary at all, Sveta.” Anna said. “Just different. They're nice, I promise. You trust me, right?”

“Uh-huh.” she mumbled, but still was shivering.

“They won't hurt you.” I told her. “I promise.”

“Hey, I got your back, kid.” Robby told her, squeezing her arm lightly. “I wouldn't let anyone hurt my favorite little princess.”

“Bring the tablet, Ashley.” I said, waving Kre forward.

The Kuuuuug neared us, then came to a complete stop directly in front of us. They bent their heads forward, closing their eyes as they bowed.

“Haauuu-li ka. Wi Segwa, Uuu-won so.” the center one said.

“Uh... Kre?” I asked.

“Hang on.” she said, punching at the tablet. “It says some gibberish, a bunch of question marks, then *welcome*, followed by *most*, then *revered*. There is more symbols I don’t understand after that, followed by *honor*.”

“I guess that thing doesn’t work all that well.” Preston said.

“They are welcoming us, that’s what is important.” I said. “Tell them thank you and it’s good to be here again.”

“Okay, uh... there.” she said.

She held the tablet out toward the nearest Kuuuuug and he stared down at it for a long while, then turned to one of the others who came over to look. They consulted in their language for a moment, then laughed and turned toward us, handing the tablet back to Kre as they smiled and nodded. They turned away and the nearest one waved a hand for us to follow.

As we entered the city there was a different feel to things. Many people were out in the streets, as before, but now they looked stiff and worried-- happy to see us, but still anxious.

“What do you think is going on?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know. They seem agitated about something, though.”

One of the Kuuuuug stepped forward, taking an aggressive stance toward us. I was actually quite scared. Robby reached toward his gun.

“No.” I said forcefully.

The Kuuuuug waved his arms in an animated fashion, first toward the sky, then into the distance, as he went on at some length before pausing when another Kuuuuug stepped forward to touch his arm in a comforting fashion.

“Kre?” I asked.

“Something about it being our fault, a lot of incomprehensible stuff, then says we’re all going to die, then something about us bringing it.”

“Is that a threat?” Robby asked quickly.

“I don’t think so, Chief.” she said. “I don’t think he was saying they were going to kill us, I think he was saying something was going to kill us all, including the Kuuuuug.”

“So what is going to kill us, then?” Pok asked.

“No clue, Ailanna.” Kre told her. “What do we do, Captain?”
“Let’s find Kuura Pa.”

We moved forward, ignoring the angry shouts from some and smiling at those few who seemed pleased to see us. Most people stood aside and watched us closely as we passed by.

Soon we were to the church. Kuura Pa stood, smiling, outside the doors as he waited to greet us. He, at least, seemed genuinely happy to see us. He grunted and said something in their native language.

“He welcomes us.” Kre said. “And I think he said something about apologizing for our rude treatment.”

“Thank you, Kuura Pa,” I said, bowing my head slightly. “If we could go inside I could introduce those of us you haven’t yet met.”

Kre turned the tablet so he could see it and he gave it a skeptical look, but then nodded. He turned and waved us inside, guiding us to the back room where we had been before.

I spent a few moments introducing the members of our group he hadn’t yet met. Dr. Gershawn, in particular, seemed very curious about him, and she kept asking questions. Some of her questions ventured beyond the typical physical differences between us and entered into slightly personal territory, which I had to point out was not appropriate, and we did not relay those questions to him. Despite her curiosity, we had no need to know about their reproductive methods.

“Can he tell us why the others were going to attack us?” Robby asked.

“Brought Travelers.” Kre translated, after Kuura Pa replied to the question on her screen. “Something about Travelers come, they found them because of us.”

“What Travelers?” I asked.

Kuura Pa went on a very long, and angry, rant about something. He waved his arms dramatically, and several times paused for a second to handle a symbol that hung around his neck. Finally he nodded to Kre and motioned toward me, and she held the tablet out to me.

“Here before.” I read aloud. “Turned away by leader.

Something something, blah, then something about an attack, and something about leader's hearts, then more gibberish."

"Sounds like they had a conflict with someone before we were here." Robby said. "Other humans?"

"Not humans." I read, after waiting for Kuura Pa's answer. "He said the others came long before the humans."

"Who then?" Bao asked.

"Not humans." I replied, not waiting for Kuura Pa. "How many sentient species are out there? How many have space flight?" I asked him.

It was shocking to me to find that we weren't the only spacefaring species in the universe to begin with, but I was amazed to hear that there was another species capable of that. I wasn't entirely shocked to find out that a sentient species existed, just that they had advanced to the level of space travel.

"Do not know." was Kuura Pa's reply, which I read aloud. "Travelers first."

"Why the hell do they call them Travelers?" Shauna asked.

"They said they travel vast." Kuura Pa's response came.

"Is that thing getting better at translating?" Chief Preston asked. "It seems like it."

It did seem like it. I had no idea, maybe the program learned as it was being used, but we were all very thankful. It was good to be able to carry on a conversation.

The more we tried to find out about the Travelers, the less he seemed to want to talk about it. The only thing we did manage to get from him was that the humans came after the Travelers did, and that the humans were on this moon for about a month and a half, but only visited the Kuuuuug twice until the last week, when they came every day.

"Come," Kuura Pa said by way of the tablet interpreter. He said some other things it couldn't interpret, then "Place food for rest and." it said.

"Uh," I mumbled, looking around to the others. "I think he wants us to come along so he can show us to a place where we can rest and they will bring us some food. Is everyone okay with that?"

"Lead the way, Madame Sandy." Dr. Gershawn said to me.

"What?" I asked, confused at her calling me that.

"Literary reference." she said, shooing me on. "Old and

obscure, don't worry about it."

We followed Kuura Pa along a corridor to a room that was slightly smaller than the office we had been in, but still large enough for us to all fit comfortably in. He went to a large crate in the back and opened it, retrieving a pile of fuzzy blankets, which he began laying out on the floor. As he did that, he grumbled and glanced up at us repeatedly.

"He said something about blankets, then apologies, then hope enough." Kre, who I had handed the tablet back to, interpreted.

"That will be fine." I said, and she entered it into the tablet and showed him the interpretation.

"Get food." he said, nodding toward the door, smiling.

I was looking at the tablet with Kre, discussing the accuracy of the program and marveling at how wonderful the programmer was, when I happened to glance up and see Anna chatting and giggling with Shauna again, Shauna leaning in close to her. Too close.

Jealousy was not something I handled well. To say I was hurt by Anna and Shauna seemingly getting close would be an understatement of epic proportions. On the other hand, I couldn't really say anything about it, and I didn't. But I was teary eyed all night that night.

Kuura Pa returned a short time later, along with another Kuuuuug, each carrying a large tray full of food. They set them in the floor in the center of the room and Kuura Pa signaled toward it.

"Food. Please here all night. Morning talk." Kre translated for us.

"Thank you, Kuura Pa." I said. "We will stay here tonight and speak to you in the morning."

He and the other Kuuuuug made grunts and turned away from us, shuffling along in their odd, three legged way. We waited until they were gone, then sat on the blankets around the room.

"Surely this is safe for us to eat?" Ailanna Pok asked the doctor.

"Let's see," she said scanning over it with her eyes. "It looks like it should be. Assuming this is all what I think it is. I don't have any good way to test it, though."

“Surely they wouldn’t feed us anything they thought was dangerous.” Ensign Debartolo said. “Maybe they fed the other humans before?”

“Could be.” Dr. Gershawn Agreed.

“I’m so hungry I’d eat cow shit right now.” Shauna said.

There were no plates, but there were wide spatulas that were almost as large, and we used them as there were exactly the right number for our group. Everyone loaded their spatula/plate with chunks of meat and vegetables, then began to eat. They managed to take nearly all the vegetables, sadly, and I didn’t end up with a lot of food.

“Is that all you’re eating?” Anna asked me.

“I guess.” I said, looking back at the nearly empty trays, which now only held a few more scraps of meat.

“You should eat more. Gotta keep your strength up.”

“Here you go, kiddo.” Bao said, holding her spatula/ plate out as she shoved most of her vegetables onto mine. “I’ll get some more meat.”

“Thanks.” I told her.

The food was delicious. The things I ate were mostly things we had already figured out were safe, but they were all cooked together and had some kind of seasoning that was amazing and spicy.

We were all so tired that we stretched out to sleep soon after eating. I was silently crying to myself when Anna nuzzled up next to me. I wasn’t sure what to think at that point, but I welcomed the comfort of her warmth against my back.

—

In the morning we were awakened by a couple of Kuuuuug that I didn’t recognize. They seemed to be women, and they had long aprons on, protecting their clothing underneath from any splatterings of the food on the trays they carried in. They each bowed to us, then retreated through the door without speaking.

“Eat up, people.” Bao said. “We may have a long day ahead of us.”

The entire morning after that was spent following around one of the Kuuuuug who promised to bring us to Kuura Pa, but instead

wound up taking us first to his own home, then to town square, then back to the church. While it was all wonderful and beautiful, it seemed to go on forever. And there were more people in the streets who were angry with us, for some reason.

Then, at mid-morning, the entire town seemed to stop suddenly. There was apparently a brunch hour that I hadn't expected. The one guiding us, whose name we finally learned was Horuun, offered us another large meal, which we declined. Instead we sat, sipping at some kind of tea-like drink, waiting for him and others to finish their brunch.

After brunch we were taken out into the main nave of the church, where we were asked to wait in the seats. It was only a moment later that Kuura Pa came out, and I got to my feet to greet him, only to be waved down by Horuun. Kuura Pa went to the front and began to gather large straight posts and placing them in a kind of barrel thing. He then lit wood that was within a gigantic fireplace along one wall.

A few moments later natives began filing into the church, giving us looks of either anger, curiosity, or surprise as they passed by us to look for their seats. Once the seats were full, Kuura Pa boomed out a welcome to everyone. He said a few words about 'the great' something or others, then invited everyone to join him. Many, but not all, ventured forward, each taking a pole from the barrel as they reached the front of the line. Upon Kuura Pa's signal, they began filing past the fire, lighting the end of their poles before circling the room in a line. As they walked around the room multiple times, they chanted something that the translator couldn't decipher. Kuura Pa boomed out another indecipherable word, then all the Kuuuuug holding poles left the building, followed shortly by the remainder of those who had come for the service.

We waited as Kuura Pa made his way back up the central aisle to the front, where he extinguished the fire. He scooped out some of the ash that had built up quickly in the bottom of the fireplace, dumping it into a pail, which he sat aside. At that point he stood upright, tilted his body back and groaned as he stuck his arms out to the side.

"What do you think he's doing?" Shauna whispered to Anna.
"Stretching?" Anna replied.

I was getting tired of them being so chummy together. Jealousy was becoming more and more of an issue for me, even as I tried harder to hold it down. Sveta's tug on my arm distracted me before I could say something I'd regret, though, and I leaned down to see what she wanted.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Go ahead and stretch out here and take a nap, Sveta," I told her. "It will be okay for a while."

She stretched out in the seat and laid her head on my lap. She was out in seconds. I don't think the girl had slept much the night before. I know I hadn't, and I had heard her moving around in the night. Even though I was sure she was scared, she did not whine or cry, didn't do anything at all that would wake others, which was very good considering she was only four years old.

Before long Kuura Pa had turned and made his way back up the aisle toward us. He stopped before us and mumbled something in their language. Kre took a moment, then read from the tablet, which had translated for us.

"He's tired, I think," she said. "He said this was a cleansing ceremony for their visiting... I think it's supposed to say leader, though it says head."

"Their leader is here?" Bao asked.

"He's not the leader?" Pok asked.

"And then," Kre said, shaking her head. "He invited us to go to lunch."

"How the hell many times a day do these people eat?" Shauna asked.

"Be respectful!" I demanded.

It sounded-- to my own ears even-- too harsh a response for a simple statement. Still, she had been disrespectful. Even if the natives wouldn't know she was saying something like that, the rest of us knew, and I didn't want that kind of attitude showing on our faces or in how we acted toward the others.

We went to lunch with Kuura Pa, thanking him repeatedly for inviting us. He led us to a large room where there was a gigantic table. We took seats on backless stools that surrounded it, and we waited as Kuura Pa himself served each of us. When I paused as he handed me a plate his face filled with curiosity, but no anger. He

shook the plate and grunted as he held it out.

“I apologize, Kuura Pa,” I said. I took the plate from him and sat it before me. “It’s just that I don’t eat meat.”

Kre scrambled for the tablet and typed in what I had said. She had to stand to bring it down the table to him so he could read it. The entire crew, even Sveta– who Dr. Gershawn had awakened– stared at Kuura Pa silently, waiting for a response. After reading the tablet, he turned to me and stared for a moment. Eventually he let out a quick laugh and grabbed the plate. He set it before his own chair, then took his empty plate and filled it with only vegetables, setting that one down before me with a smile.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to convey how appreciative I really was.

I wasn’t about to start something by insulting the natives, but I felt very strongly about not eating helpless animals. I understood that others would, and I have always thought that was their own choice and own burden to bear, but I feel almost ill just thinking about eating meat. I think I’d rather starve. I was very happy that he didn’t take offense.

After lunch, Kuura Pa guided us back to his office and he invited us to sit. He went to a large pitcher that was on the table and began to fill glasses with a clear liquid that turned out to be water. I hadn’t realized that at first, since the water on that moon was red in color, but it had been cleaned somehow and was clear.

“The leader will come later today.” he said, via the tablet.

“Who is this leader?” Bao asked.

“Leader of all Kuuuuug.” Kuura Pa said. “From many distance.”

“Why does he want to meet us?” I asked.

“Check. Help.”

“Help us with what?” Robby asked. “We were doing okay without the help.”

“Not.” Kuura Pa said, smiling. “You help.”

“What do you need our help with, Kuura Pa.” I asked, quickly adding “I’m sure whatever it is we would be happy to help if we can.”

“Let the leader speak.” Kuura Pa said, looking a little unhappy.

“I take it you aren’t too happy with what he wants our help with?” I asked.

"Let he speak." he responded.

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry." I said. "I was just curious."

"Leader and Kuura not... nice."

"You don't get along with the leader?" Robby asked. "Do we need to worry about there being any problems?"

"Respect." Kuura Pa said. "Less thought."

He respected that he was the leader, but didn't like him. At least that's what I thought he meant. I guess I'll never know his true feelings about him, but at the time that was the impression I got.

"Tell us about the humans who were here before." I said.

"Pass by. Here they for little. Rest. Food." he responded. "Tell more of leader." he said, flipping a hand absently in a very human-looking manner.

"Why did they leave?" I asked.

"Leader speak." he said. "I will go prepare night service."

He slipped away from us, leaving us in his office, drinking the water he left for us. At first we were very quiet and just sat there, waiting for Kuura Pa to return. When he didn't after a long time, most of the group became restless. Svetlana, who was one of the most well behaved children I have ever had the pleasure of knowing, even started walking around the room and touching things.

"What are you doing, Sveta?" Dr. Gershawn asked.

"Touching." Sveta replied.

"I don't know if you should do that."

"She should be fine, as long as she is careful not to knock anything over or pick anything up." I said.

Dr. Gershawn gave me a slightly angry look, but I didn't care. And Kuura Pa seemed to me to be the kind of guy that wouldn't mind a child playing.

It seemed to take a very long time, but eventually Horuun came and brought us into the main nave. Kuura Pa was once again at the front, preparing a ceremony. And once again he lit a fire, followed only a moment later by a crowd squeezing into the church.

And then there was a loud banging of drums outside. A moment later Kuura Pa began to clap to the rhythm, with the crowd following him shortly after that. Horuun was near us, and he look at us and motioned toward our hands as he clapped. We began to clap

along to the beat as well, with even Sveta joining in. She seemed to enjoy it, actually, laughing and smiling. Some of the nearby Kuuuuug looked down on her, smiling.

A Kuuuuug dressed in a long, ornate robe entered the back of the church. He was followed by a similarly dressed drummer, carrying a large and very loud drum as he marched in time with the beats. He was followed by several men who seemed to be armed with swords in their hands and some other kind of weapons in holsters.

And then came the leader. He was on a humongous cart, which had large wheels at either end. He was being pushed by two other Kuuuuug-- attendants-- who pushed him up the aisle toward the front. They were followed by several more guards, as well as one more drummer.

When the leader was all the way to the front, he was turned in a laborious procedure. The cart had no provision for steering, as far as I could tell, and it took quite an effort from the Kuuuuug who were pushing to change the direction of the cart with the leader atop it. Once to the side, they then had to rotate it so that he was facing Kuura Pa. The drums stopped, which brought a quick end to the clapping.

“We welcome grand exalted!” Kuura Pa boomed out to the crowd.

This was followed by a loud and raucous screeching sound being made by most of the Kuuuuug at that point. This went on for some time, to the obvious joy of their leader, but was then brought to a halt by Kuura Pa.

“We dedicate service in his joy.” Kuura Pa said.

He then proceeded to speak only to the crowd, as he said several words about the sky spirit, followed by something about wind. Our translating tablet was having a hard time distinguishing because of all the noise in the room. This went on for nearly an hour, I’d estimate. Then several Kuuuuug went down the aisles, handing something that looked very much like a small cheese disk to the Kuuuuug at the end of each row.

I was surprised to hear a chorus of loud grunts at that point. I looked around to notice that each Kuuuuug was taking a bite from the

cheese, making a grunting sound, then passing it on to the next person in their row. I was just beginning to wonder if we would be expected to take part in this when Horuun held the cheese out to me.

I wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't even sure what this was supposed to signify. Was it their way of joining some horrible cult, or just a sign of respect. I did not know, and I wasn't sure I wanted to follow through, but Horuun was giving me an expectant look. I took the risk and bit a small piece of the cheese off– and it *was* cheese– then passed the cheese to Bao, bypassing Svetlana. I looked back at Horuun and he smiled encouragingly.

At the end of the row the same Kuuuuug who had handed out the cheese gathered the remains up in a basket, proceeding to the front to combine it all into one larger basket, which was then presented to Kuura Pa, who in turn shuffled slowly across to the leader to present it to him. The leader accepted it with a smile, handing it off to one of his guard, then turned and regarded Kuura Pa and said something. Kuura Pa muttered in return, then dipped his head in a bow.

Except he didn't stop at a bow. He bent all the way down, kissing the leader's bare foot. As Kuura Pa stepped back, the crowd began to slip from the rows to line up in front of the leader. Even as the rows were emptying, I could see around people enough to realize that they were not just kissing the leader's foot, they were licking it.

“Eww.” I mumbled, not able to hold it in.

I had the horrible idea that we were each going to be required to go up there and lick that foot, the same as everyone else. I felt my heart pounding as the rows in front of us cleared into the aisle for their chance to lick the leader's foot. I glanced at my crew, seeing that several of them were aware of what was going on, and not happy at the prospect of following suit. But Horuun caught my attention and motioned for each of us to sit down, then he himself eagerly entered the center aisle for his opportunity to lick the leader's foot.

After the Kuuuuug had all returned to their seats, the drums began their beating rhythm again. Kuura Pa stood near the front, beginning his clapping, and others followed his lead. Then the guards and attendants led the leader out of the church.

It wasn't long before the rest of the Kuuuuug left as well, other

than Kuura Pa and a handful of his assistants. And then even Kuura Pa disappeared through a side door, leaving us with just Horuun and the other assistants.

“Go.” Horuun said, via the tablet.

“And just where the hell are we supposed to go?” Shauna asked.

“Ask him where.” I told Kre, hoping she’d ignore Shauna.

Kre typed away at the tablet, then turned the screen toward Horuun. He read it, then pointed down the aisle toward Kuura Pa’s office. We were being led there. Again.

Kuura Pa was in his office when we got there. He motioned us to sit, then took a moment to take a large drink from a bowl on his desk.

“Service was not boring, hope.” he said.

“It was very fascinating, actually.” Chief Kouri said. “And that cheese was wonderful. Very smooth.”

“I thought we were going to talk to your leader?” Pok asked.

“After.” Kuura Pa replied.

“After what, Kuura Pa?” I asked.

“Food. We eat. Come.” he said, starting for the door.

“For shitsake, I don’t think I can force another bite down my throat.” Shauna exclaimed. “Count me out.”

“Okay, A,” I said. “Watch your language in front of Sveta, please.”

“Sorry.”

“And B, don’t be so rude. If you don’t want to eat, that’s fine, but your reply was very rude.”

“Well it’s not like Ash was going to type that all in!”

“It shows in your body language.” Bao told her. “Now follow him.”

We followed Kuura Pa out into the main nave, then into another room off to the side. A large dining table occupied a majority of the room, and there were Kuuuuug seated along both sides. Maybe twenty of them in all.

“Seat.” Kuura Pa said.

“Thank you.” I told him. “We don’t... humans don’t eat this often usually, Kuura Pa. No disrespect intended.”

“Drink.” he said, grunting. “Do not eat if do not hungry.”

“Thank you.”

It occurs to me now that the Kuuuuug were much like humans in how they ate, in that some were sloppy eaters and some were not. Most there that day were quite sloppy, and I almost felt nauseous as I watched food and drink dripping from their mouths as they tried to eat, drink and talk all at the same time.

One exception to this was Kuura Pa. He used his utensils, which were almost exactly like the ones we were used to, to carve eat piece carefully, then just as carefully would scoop each piece to his mouth, where he would chew it slowly with his mouth closed.

At the end of the meal Kuura Pa led us back into the nave. I was starting to fear that we'd have to sit through yet another religious service, but instead he led us through the front door and onto the street. There we were guided along for several minutes to a large building with a huge statue of the leader in front of it.

“See leader.” he told me, waving toward the statue.

I wasn't sure if he was trying to say something about the statue or if he was telling me the leader was within. I opened my mouth to comment that it was a nice statue, but he motioned toward the door and shuffled away from me. Apparently it was the latter choice.

There were more guards inside than I had seen before. Many times more. They appeared to be almost military-like, like maybe this was some sort of armed militia group. I stepped forward, planning to ask to see the leader. Instead I was met by three of the guards— one in front of me and one holding each arm.

“Hey hey!” I heard Bao say.

“Back off, now!” Robby shouted.

I didn't need to turn to see that he had drawn his gun. The guards were eying him, I think trying to figure out if he posed a threat or not.

“Stillness.” Kuura Pa said, with Kre translating using the tablet. “Not hurt.”

“Lower your gun, Chief.” I said, as the Kuuuuug in front of me raised a black rectangular object in front of my face.

“Are you sure, Captain?” he asked.

“Yes.” I squeaked.

Getting into a fight with the Kuuuuug would do neither side any good, and I knew that. I was scared of what the black object was, but I trusted Kuura Pa– sort of– and figured he wouldn’t let me be hurt. At least I hoped.

After a moment, the object before me was lowered and I was waved forward. A security scan of some sort, I think, is what that was.

I stepped forward, and each of my crew took their turn before the security guard, Robby getting an extra close look. He looked jittery, and Bao had to tell him to just stand calmly and don’t do anything stupid to get him to stop moving about.

After that, Kuura Pa was able to guide us into the next room. A large chamber that was empty, except for a small amount of furniture and some rugs.

“We wait.” Kuura Pa said.

And wait we did.

Chapter Five

I think we sat in that room, waiting for the leader, for at least two hours. Kuura Pa kept reassuring us that the leader would be there soon, that he must have been delayed. He wouldn't tell us any more information about the leader, *or* about the humans who were there before. It was the leader's duty, he said.

While we waited we sat or laid out on the soft rugs that adorned the floors of the massive room. Sometimes one or two of us would stand and pace around, and on more than one occasion someone would complain that they were thirsty, or that they needed fresh air.

The room had a long center section, with tall pillars three or four meters in from each wall. At the end of the room opposite the one we entered through there stood a tall chair that was adorned with all sorts of odd and rare looking crystals of various colors of the rainbow. A throne. That was the only official furniture in the room, though some stairs just before it seemed to create a sort of makeshift seating area.

And that is where Kuura Pa and several guards sat while we waited. Kuura Pa looked as anxious to get this over with as we were. He also seemed very upset with the delay.

And then the drum sounds we heard earlier could be heard from behind one of the walls. As it neared, we could tell it was coming from the left side of the throne. And then a massive set of doors sprang open, the drummers leading the way of the procession through and into the room we occupied. We raised to our feet as the leader moved— on his own feet this time— to his throne, where he lowered himself.

"Greetings, exalted." Kuura Pa said. "I have brought uuuu-
mons as you question."

"You will come forward now." the leader said, Kre translating

from the tablet.

We all stood and approached the stair, Sveta cowering behind Dr. Gershawn. The leader's eyes lingered on each one of us, staring into us it seemed, before his eyes flickered back to Chief Kouri.

"Step forward." he said to Kouri. "We shall speak."

"Exalted," Kuura Pa said.

"Quietness." the leader said.

Anton stepped forward and stopped. Kuura Pa started to speak again, but a look from the leader silenced him.

"How many are you?" asked the leader, through Kre.

"I'm not at liberty to say." Kouri responded, giving what looked from the side to be a defiant look. One of the guards read aloud from our tablet, working as the go between for us.

"Dare, followed by some gibberish." Kre said, translating the loud stream of speech.

"Exalted," Kuura Pa tried again, but was once again silenced.

I'd had enough. I stepped forward to speak, but Bao had beaten me to it. And as I stepped forward, so did Anna and Robby.

"We speak as one." Bao told him. "And don't demand answers from us, we are not prisoners."

"You cannot speak—" Kre was translating.

"I will speak to whoever I want and however I want. We are not prisoners." Bao interrupted.

"Miss Bao," Kuura Pa said. "Please be respect. Exalted is not trying to be prisoners. This is how leaders tell."

"He sounds like a very rude guy." Robby said.

I could tell that Kre was preparing to translate that and told her not to. Instead I raised up my hand to get everyone's attention.

"Hello, leader." I said. I bowed my head slightly as a sign of respect. "I am the head of our expedition." I told him.

The leader seemed surprised, and looked over to Kuura Pa to verify what his own translator had just read from the tablet Kre was holding. Kuura Pa muttered something, then the leader's eyes returned to me.

"How many?" he asked.

"Do not tell him." Bao mumbled to me.

"There are..." I said, realizing Bao was right. Telling him we were it would put us at danger, possibly. "Here, or in space?" I asked. "It is of no importance." I flipped my hand absently, trying to play it off. "There are only the twelve of us on the moon. I have no way of knowing how many would come if anything were to happen to us."

That was completely true. For all I knew, there could possibly have been a lot of other humans headed that direction even as we spoke.

"Our goal is supposed to be to find a suitable location for a colony in this area. We would like to be friends with your people, and we would like to set up a small colony nearby, where we may be able to trade and help one another."

It was a very long time before he responded. It looked like he was trying to think through the things I had just said. His head turned toward Kuura Pa and he stared at him for a long moment, then back to me.

"How long have you been here?" the leader asked.

"A short time." I replied.

"We welcome you." he said. "For now. Tell us about the Travelers."

"The Travelers? We hadn't heard of them until talking to your people."

"Our *something or other*," Kre said, giving me an apologetic look as she tried to translate. "Our *something or other* detected your people with the Travelers."

"Not our group." I said, trying to explain. "They came before us. We have no contact with that group of humans, and we have no knowledge of their contact."

"As said." was his reply, with a smile. "Perhaps help from?"

"We received no help from either the other group here before or the Travelers, leader."

"From you us help." he said, looking upset.

"We need." Kuura Pa said, trying to explain.

"You need our help?" I asked. "How can we help? I'm sure we'd be happy to."

"Make Travelers go." the leader said.

Make the Travelers go. It took me several moments to

understand what he was asking. He wanted us to make the Travelers leave them alone.

“I don’t understand what you are asking.” I said.

“Make Travelers go.” the leader repeated.

I turned to Bao. I hoped that she would have some idea of how we could even do that. Or *why* we would do that. She seemed as lost as I was.

“Uh... you don’t want the Travelers here?” I asked the leader.

His scowl was an answer. “But why?”

“Danger!” the leader shouted.

“Did they attack you?” Bao asked.

“Yes!” the leader said loudly.

“No.” Kuura Pa said.

By the time we had read that statement the leader was already displaying obvious anger at Kuura Pa. He waved a guard over toward Kuura Pa and shouted something that the tablet wasn’t able to interpret.

“Wait.” I said, sticking a hand out toward Kuura Pa.

“We killed!” Kuura Pa said to the leader.

“Lock he!” the leader shouted back, the guards still dragging him.

“If you want our help you will stop!” I shouted. It did no good, they continued to drag him. “Stop or we leave and you can deal with the Travelers alone!”

The guards stopped. The leader hadn’t asked them to, they just did. In fact, the leader was clearly trying to get them to continue. The guards were ignoring him, clearly upset with the idea of facing the Travelers without our assistance.

“He’s threatening them with jail themselves.” Kre told me, looking at the tablet.

“I want you to stop trying to take Kuura Pa away and just tell us what happened right now or we leave.” I told the leader. “This is your last chance.”

“He could arrest.” one of the guards said, motioning my way with his hand.

I stared down the leader, waiting for his answer. His three eyes

glared at me stonily. Finally, he settled back into his seat, raising his head up as high as he could.

“They come far ago, threaten if we do not give all our supplies, we say no. All.” he told me, defiant sound to his voice.

“Not all.” Kuura Pa said, glaring at the leader.

“All!” the leader bellowed, glaring at Kuura Pa now. “Guards take he.”

“No!” I said. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

“Take he!” the leader shouted.

“Exalted,” one of the guards said, eying me, then eying the leader. “Can he not speak?”

“Exalted please.” another guard begged.

“Or we go.” I threatened. I could feel my legs shaking, but tried not to look scared.

The leader let out a very angry sound, then slammed a fist down on the chair. He glared at Kuura Pa and rattled off something the tablet couldn’t make out again, then stood and stomped toward the corner, where he stood like a child, looking away from me.

“Tell me the rest of the story, Kuura Pa. Please.”

“Before humans,” he said, Kre translating even the word uuuu-mon, which we all understood anyway. “Travelers come. Far ago. Research boats far up. Mistake. No food or fuel. Want us from.”

“Want all!” the leader shouted from the corner.

“Not all.” Kuura Pa said. “Want some to go. Leader ask big trade. Travelers not able. Travelers must move some to one ship, crash other ships. Some Travelers inside.”

I seriously had no idea if I had not understood that. I thought there was a chance that Kre had incorrectly read it, or that the tablet had mistranslated it. But from the look of contempt Kuura Pa was giving the leader, and the look of defiance the leader was giving back, I saw that it was true.

“You... you sent them away to die?” I asked.

“Assholes.” Shauna spat at them.

“You could have just blown their damn heads off yourself, instead of making them decide who had a chance to live.” Bao told them.

“Son of a bitch!” Robby said. “How could any human being... or whatever... I don’t even—”

“Should I translate all of that, Callie?” Kre asked.

"Of course not." Anna told her.

"Actually," I said, considering it. "Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

Kre wrote all that we had said on the tablet, then turned it so the Kuuuuug translator could read it out to the others. The leader shouted in anger, but Kuura Pa just lowered his head as if he was ashamed.

"Were you in on this, Kuura Pa?" I demanded.

"It was my decision!" the leader shouted. "I am leader! What I say must."

"Then you're a murdering scum." I said. "And I won't be a part of that."

"Then stay and save."

"Save who?" I asked. "You? How?"

"Threaten Travelers. Give us weapons. Call other humans to defend. They attack us."

"Threa... You... you want *us* to defend *you*? That's not going to happen. Defend yourselves!"

"You stay!" leader shouted, waving his hand our direction as he eyed his guards.

"Not likely." Robby said, raising his gun up.

"This is a weapon that will end your life quickly." I said. "Back off."

They did, though were obviously torn about it. I suppose they weren't too thrilled with the thought of what their great leader would do to them for disobeying.

"We need help, if will." Kuura Pa told me. "They will not hear to our try to speak. Maybe hear Cuuul-A."

"I cannot be a part of this, Kuura Pa." I said, but then rethought it. "Not while he is leader, anyway."

"Cuuul-A, leader is leader."

"Then I can't help you, Kuura Pa. I can't help someone who would let so many people die because of greed."

"We are not like that." he said. "Not all."

"I hope not." I told him.

I turned to leave the room and the guards got in the way. Robby stepped forward and they cleared the way for us.

But Kuura Pa said they weren't all like that. If that were true, I was dooming these people. At least if they were as defenseless as they seemed.

I didn't even wait to see that all my crew had followed, I just stormed out and headed down the main road toward the edge of town, back toward the clearing and our camp.

But along the way I came to the massive fountain and paused. There was a short wall that made up the outer edge of the fountain, and as I looked back and forth at the large crowd that had been parting at my approach, I realized this would do well enough for what I had in mind. And as I climbed onto the wall, I realized my crew was yelling at me to stop-- had been yelling at me for some time now-- and I spun my head to find them. They were just then getting to me, followed by Kuura Pa and the assistant, Horuun. Perfect.

"Horuun, up here." I said, signaling for Kre to translate with the tablet for him.

"What are you doing, Callie?" Bao asked.

"Kre, get up here too."

I waited for Kre to hop up on the short wall, and then a long while as Horuun made his way up. Turns out having a third leg does not aid when climbing up on such things, and even once he was up he had a hard time balancing on the narrow ledge.

"Help him translate this, exactly as I tell them." I said, nodding to her.

She wrote that on the tablet and showed it to him and he nodded. My crew, as well as several of the leader's guards now, looked up at me with questioning looks.

"Your leader is going to get you all killed!" I shouted.

"Callie, no," Anna pleaded.

"I don't know if you should open that can of worms, kiddo." Bao told me.

That did not matter to me. These people needed to know what kind of leader they had, and what kind of situation he had gotten them into, and I went on to explain every detail of what had gone on and the consequences it might bring to them if the Travelers really were coming for an attack, as the leader feared.

"And until you get rid of him," I concluded. "We cannot help you."

I hopped down from the wall and stormed the rest of the way out of the city, back into the woods. It was probably half an hour after leaving the city before my crew had finally gotten me to stop.

“You need to rest.” Anna told me. “You’ve been panting for fifteen minutes.”

“Shit, so have we all.” Shauna complained.

I sat down and the weight of it all hit me. I was so tired, and I wanted so badly to just go to sleep.

“I just don’t understand why so many people there seemed to think the Travelers coming to attack is our fault.” I mused. “They jump to that conclusion just because we happen to show up? I don’t know, I guess the timing might make us seem related somehow, I suppose.”

“Actually, kiddo, I think Kuura Pa said something that explains that.”

“When?” I asked.

“When we were running like hell to catch up with her?” Shauna asked.

“Yes.” Bao said. “He said their scientist didn’t think the Travelers would have been able to find this moon again if it hadn’t been for the explosion of our ship drawing them in this direction.”

“Worst damn timing I ever heard of. Shit.” Shauna mumbled.

“Well anyway, it doesn’t matter.” I told them. “We’ll stay here for the night, then go back to our camp tomorrow. Hopefully we can pretend we never met the Kuuuuug.”

“And hopefully they will leave us alone.” Bao said, nodding in agreement.

“And the Travelers don’t kill our asses right along with the Kuuuuug.” Shauna added.

I had no idea if the Kuuuuug were really in as much danger as they seemed to believe, but I worried. Was I dooming them to destruction by not helping? I didn’t know, but I just couldn’t help a brutal leader like theirs. He killed the other aliens as sure as if he had slit their throats himself. I just couldn’t imagine what kind of evil could lay in the man to let him do something like that over money.

I worried that they could come for us in the night, that we were staying too close to the Kuuuuug city, but I knew my crew was too exhausted to move on. Especially Svetlana. Kre had found a game

on the tablet and had let Sveta play it for a while to occupy her, but then she passed out in less than five minutes anyway.

We made up places to sleep, Anna not sleeping next to me as I was used to. I wanted to ask her to move over next to me, but I was scared to. What if she refused? I didn't think I could handle being rejected straight out like that. It was bad enough suspecting that she was no longer interested in me, that she now had some interest in Shauna instead, but I didn't think I could take hearing it directly from her.

—

We made it back to our camp late the next day. It was too late to do much more than eat and go to bed. Not that we had the energy to do much more. The only reason I think it took so long is that we had to keep stopping for Svetlana. At first it was to use the bathroom every hour, then because she was tired. And even with people taking turns carrying her, it had slowed us a lot. And then we had to take a very long lunch break, as well. And then of course we somehow got off the trail and it took over an hour to find it again.

Ailanna Pok made dinner that night. We had a very nice combination of tacos, rice and black beans. It wasn't quite up to Taco Rocko standards, but it was very good. Especially considering that Ailanna had forgotten to make mine vegetarian, and had to scrounge together enough ingredients to remake mine at the end.

When we went to bed that night, Anna was distant again. I tried to sort of roll near her, but she didn't seem to respond much to that.

"Goodnight." I told her.

"Sleep well, Callie."

"I love you."

"I..." she began, and for a brief second I thought she was actually going to say it back. But after a pause she just added "hope you have sweet dreams."

That was it. That was all I got. I had hoped for more, obviously, and as I rolled away from her that night I could feel the tears prickling my eyes.

Sleep wasn't going to come that night. I didn't sleep that well

usually anyway, having to take sleep aids many nights, but I had been doing a little better since landing on the moon. I don't know if it was something about the thin air, or maybe all the physical labor we were doing, but I felt way more exhausted than I had before we left the Freedom.

That night was especially difficult, though. Anna was snoring lightly in half an hour, but I laid there for hours and hours. Finally I got up and made my way out into the main room. I tried to occupy myself, but I couldn't really concentrate on anything. Eventually I just decided to bundle up and go outside.

It was cold when I got out there, but I thought I'd be able to handle it for a while. We were on a moon, so there wasn't any moon floating in the sky like people wrote about back on Earth. Despite that, there was some light. The planets off in the distance provided a minimal amount, and there was some that bounced off other moons of the planet, as well as other objects in the sky. There was even a small amount of light that seemed to peek just around the edge of the planet we were orbiting.

I sat there, staring into space, imagining what it must have looked like from Earth. I remember thinking that it wasn't that long ago, just a few hundred years, that people were stuck on Earth. Back then humans never dreamed of leaving the ground let alone venturing to the distant stars.

There were no people left on Earth now.

There were no people anywhere.

Or maybe there were. I hoped there were. The tablet we found with the Kuuuuug made me hopeful, but those humans had left the moon, and I had no idea where they were or if they were even still alive.

While I sat there, right outside our tent and near our incomplete log cabin, I saw something I hadn't expected: a cow. Yes, a cow. I was shocked. It was big, like a cow from Earth, and it looked remarkably like those I had seen in pictures.

The main difference I could see between it and an Earth cow were its ears and the horn. The ears were long and thin, and hung nearly to the ground. Atop its head was a corkscrewing horn that

reached probably half a meter. I have no idea about the color, it was too dark to tell, and it could have been a completely different color than an Earth cow, but it was pretty close overall.

My first reaction was just awe. Here was this giant animal, just staring at me from less than ten meters away. I vaguely thought about the fact that this could feed the others for a month, and then was upset with myself at even having that thought, as well as disgusted by the very concept of eating any living creature.

The reaction I finally came to, though, was this: This thing could be dangerous! That was a big horn, and it would quite easily poke all the way through me. And while cows on Earth were all herbivores, I had no idea if the ones there were. I hadn't even seen it open its mouth. What if it had sharp fangs in there? What if the cows there were carnivores, and would hunt for small human girls to munch on in the dark of night?

That got me moving, and I hurried back inside the tent. I worried that the thing would come in after me or one of the others, but I did not want to wake the others just because I was afraid. I considered finding Chief Duval's gun, but decided against it. I'd probably blow my own big toe off, I decided.

But that is how I happened to be the first person awake in the morning, and was able to make breakfast for the crew as I saw the light growing outside. Not that anyone had a chance to eat much.

The crew came out, one at a time— Svetlana first— wanting toast and muffins. I had just filled plates for each person when a sound came from outside. My first thought was that the cow thing had hung around and was now getting ready to attack. But then I saw Kre's eyes go wide as she dived to the side of the tent to get the tablet, which had been charging.

"They've come for us!" Robby said, moving to get his gun.

"Don't assume anything." Bao told him.

"Or else you'll make an ass out of you and me." Shauna added, laughing nervously.

We exited the tent in a group, and I was scared of what we may find. The bright morning light didn't reveal a massive beast, ready to eat us or spear us with its horn. It did not reveal an invading army. It revealed Horuun.

“He said that they need us to come back as soon as possible.” Kre told me, reading from the tablet.

“We already told you, we can’t help you as long as you’re being led by a brutal murderer.” I said.

Kre translated for me, but Horuun was already nodding as if he understood. At my side stood Bao, looking angry that they would even come here and bother us. Robby was walking around the camp, looking out into the trees for danger. I wanted to explain about the cow creature, but I didn’t really have time right then.

“Urul is no longer leader.” he told us.

“He stepped down?” Bao asked.

“No, took Cuuul-A suggestion and kill.”

“What?!” I asked, my heart dropping down through the bottom of my stomach. “I never said you should kill him!”

“You said we need else leader.” Horrun said. “Not have two.”

“You can’t have... I never said kill him!”

“How else?” he asked.

“Wait, you had to kill him?” Bao asked.

“Not Horuun. Horuun suggest banish. Kuura want banish and. Guard kill.”

“That is not what we had in mind. We didn’t want you to kill him, we didn’t want anyone killed. Damn, that was exactly what started this mess to begin with.” she explained.

“Kuuuuug not have two leaders.” Horuun repeated.

“So you have to kill the old one?” I asked.

“Not have to. Kill or make leave. Guard kill.”

“Why should we help you then? If you’re a bunch of killers?”

“Need help. Kuuuuug die else.”

“But Horuun, we don’t want to help brutal–”

“Was your thought!” he insisted.

My idea led to it. That is what he was telling us. And I felt devastated. I couldn’t stand there any longer, I retreated to a log that had been dragged over for construction but not yet placed. I sat and stared at the ground.

“Callie?” Kre asked.

“It’s my fault.” I told her. Told all of them.

“Well hell, girl, making suggestions like that has consequences.” Shauna said. “What’d you expect?”

“I just didn’t want to help an evil, brutal leader. I never meant

for them to—”

“Well they killed his ass so you’d come back. Happy now?”

“Back off, Shauna.” Bao said. “Callie, what do you want to do? They still need our help.”

“I don’t... I don’t even...” I looked up at her. “Y-you decide, Bao. You take over. You’re... in charge now.”

“Kiddo,”

“Do you need to banish me, like they do?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Pok said. “We need you, Captain.”

“I’m not...” I shook my head and fought to keep the tears at bay. “Not anymore. Bao’s in charge. What’s your orders, Captain Xiang?”

“I’m not doing it.” she said. “You can’t blame yourself for this, and I’m not taking over just because they did something stupid and you are upset. Not happening, kiddo. Your mother would kill me.”

“But this is my fault! I told them to get rid of him! Can we blame them if they decided the only way we would help is by doing exactly that?”

“It was *their* call.” Dr. Gershawn said. “I don’t like it, but it isn’t your fault.”

“Would you have made the same decision, Bao?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter, kiddo. You are in charge.”

She didn’t see that it did matter. It mattered a lot. If she would have refused to help like I had then I could maybe forgive myself. But if she would have helped them then it meant that my actions and words were directly to blame for them killing their leader. I had to know.

“Answer me, Bao. Please.”

“No.” she said, looking away.

“No? First you tell me I’m still in charge, then you won’t answer when I have a simple question?”

“I mean no, I wouldn’t have made the same call. I would have helped. Not because they deserved it, but because we may need them, and because I wouldn’t want to see their people killed just because of their idiot leader.”

And that pretty much was what I feared she would say. I felt hollowed out. My bad judgment had gotten someone killed. Again. It wasn’t enough that my incompetence had cost the crew of Freedom their lives, or that I pretty much doomed humans to extinction, but now I was destroying other civilizations.

“What do we do, then?” I asked her.

“They need our help.” she said, simply.

“Orders, Captain?” Kre asked me.

“Tell him we’ll come.”

Chapter Six

We arrived back at their city just after dawn the day after Horuun had come for us. The place was a mess. There were spots where there had obviously been fighting, and there were damaged buildings, fences, and even one smaller fountain in front of one of the homes. There were also signs of what appeared to be blood in several places.

“What happened here?” Bao asked Horuun.

“Not all are happy about leader.” he responded.

“Are we safe here, Captain?” Robby asked.

“Kre, ask him.” I said, still upset that they insisted on looking to me for decisions.

I cost their leader his life. I had a bad feeling, and could have looked more carefully at things and maybe have stopped the Freedom from being hit by whatever it was hit by. I even could have whined more and saved my parents from their horrible fate.

“He said be aware, but he didn’t think we’d be attacked.” Kre told me.

“Eyes open, everyone.” I ordered.

“Anyone else ready to carry teeny here so I can have my hands free in case?” Robby asked, referring to Svetlana, who he was carrying.

We didn’t stop at the church, as I had expected, but instead made our way back to the building where we had met their leader. People were crowded around it, all on edge, but nobody made any aggressive moves toward us. Even the guards– who there were an awful lot of– didn’t give us so much as a nod.

Horuun guided us back to a different room than before. There were probably fifty natives inside, about one third of which were obviously guards. At the front was Kuura Pa, standing on a dais and speaking to the others.

“They’re talking about what to do about the Travelers.” Kre interpreted. “He said they must contact them soon or it will be too late.”

“What is going on, Horuun?” I asked.

“Elders from each city. Choice leader. Choice of Travelers.” he said.

“How many cities do your people have?” Bao asked.

“Nineteen large, many little. Large speak of area.”

“The large cities are regional capitals?” Ensign Debartolo asked.

“As said.” Horuun agreed.

“Kuura Pa wants you to come to the stage, Callie.” Kre said. She had been paying attention to both him and Horuun, apparently.

It was awkward to go to the dais, up in front of everyone, but I did it, dragging Kre along so she could interpret. And I realized there were about fifty pairs– or trios– of eyes watching me the entire way there.

“I have speak you to elders.” Kuura Pa said. “Will you speak?”

“Um...” I said, looking around and feeling about two years old. “What would you like me to say”

“Speak Travelers. Hear speak signals, they threat.”

“Well,” I said, afraid to continue, but feeling that I had to. “From what I can tell, they are attacking because they think your people let theirs die.”

There was a tense moment when I, and the rest of my crew, waited for their interpreter to let the others of their kind know what I had said and to see what their reaction was. I was slightly surprised that only a few looked angry at my words.

“Leader did.” Kuura Pa finally said. “We are not leader.”

“Who is the leader now?” I asked. “I won’t support someone who would put the safety of other people, no matter the species, behind profits.”

“Not!” one in crowd cried out.

“He means there is not a leader.” Kuura Pa explained. “We choice later. Now stop attacking most high important.”

“Do you all agree that the leader... the *previous* leader should not have turned the others away at their time of need?” I asked.

“Resources important!” one of them shouted. He was booed by others. “We need.”

“Plenty resources.” another said. “Greedy.” Most seemed to

agree with that view.

"I..." I said, taking a deep breath. I couldn't believe I was doing it. "I will talk to them and see if they will hold off until you have a new leader who they can talk to."

"Year to choice." Kuura Pa said.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "There is no way I can buy you a year. They aren't going to go along with that."

"Not know." he argued. "Speak Travelers."

"I know." I said. And I was pretty sure I was right. "You have to choose sooner. I'll see if I can get you a few days."

That did not meet with happy reactions from the crowd. In fact, they seemed very angry with me. Robby moved toward the platform, but I waved him back. They at least weren't showing any signs of physically attacking me. Yet.

"No choice!" Kuura Pa shouted to them. They quieted. "She truth. No time to speak of people, must decide."

"She is right." one of them said. "Travelers not wait that time."

There was a lot of chatter back and forth, and there was no way for Kre to pick up any real coherent sense from it. We just waited while they argued for probably close to five minutes before one of the taller, and older looking, Kuuuuug stood and silenced everyone with a look.

"Please." he said to me. "We yes two weeks."

"Kuura Pa?" I asked.

"Our people decide in that amount." he said, agreeing.

"Okay. So... is there a way we can talk to them now?"

"Speak machine." Horuun said, answering before Kuura Pa had a chance. "I will take."

"I want Kuura Pa there as well." I told him.

—

After a meal— actually two— Horuun led us into a room where Kuura Pa was waiting for us. There was a large box with wires running from it, with something that looked slightly like an ancient Earth radio attached to it. There was a long wire with another small speaker attached. Horuun handed me the smaller speaker and showed me a button on the table next to the larger speaker.

"Press to speak, don't to hear." he explained.

“It’s like our portable emergency communicators.” Bao said.

I nodded to her, and motioned Kre over close by me so she would be there to interpret, if needed. It wasn’t until that moment that it even occurred to me that I had no way to understand what the Travelers were saying, that I’d probably have to have the Kuuuuug translate for me, after Kre translated to them.

I pressed the button and raised the speaker to my face.

“This is Captain Calliope Monroe of the UNSC Fr... Thumper.” I said, almost slipping to say Freedom. It still hadn’t sunk in that the Freedom was gone, that we were all that was left of that crew. That it was at least partly my fault. “Does anyone hear me?”

I let up on the button and waited for a response. After a moment I pressed the button and repeated it. Still nothing.

“We are here with the Kuuuuug, having landed here only a few weeks ago. They have asked me to contact you to try to work out a peaceful solution.”

I waited a long time again, and was about to give up when there was a static break in the speaker. I could hear what sounded like mumbling between several people.

“Human?” a gravelly voice sounded out.

It took me a moment to realize that they were speaking English. Very well. And then I was in awe for a moment, because my first thought was that their translation abilities were much better than ours. It took a moment for me to realize that there was no translation, they were actually speaking English.

“Yes, who is this?” I managed.

“I am Engineer Lal.” the voice said. “How did you come to be with the Kuuuuug?”

“We landed here not long ago, Lal. We were on a larger ship, but it was hit by something, and we are all who escaped.”

“It was your ship that was hit by our debris, then?” the voice asked. “I am sorry about your crew, Captain.”

“Your debris? What do you mean by that?”

“Many years ago we had ships visit this moon. They were forced to abandon two of the three ships because of problems.” he

said, sounding slightly angry. “We think the two ships collided sometime later, and that the debris was floating through this area. Not long ago we detected our debris, but it abruptly changed course and was mixed with other debris. Possibly it hit your ship?”

So that’s what hit the Freedom? That’s why our crew was dead? Part of me wanted to scream at the Kuuuuug about it, because in a roundabout way they were responsible for our crew’s death. But I knew that the leader was now dead, that the Kuuuuug here didn’t have anything to do with it.

“How do they speak English?” Pok asked me.

“How the hell is she supposed to know?” Bao asked, sounding snippy for some reason.

“Engineer Lal, may I ask how you happen to be able to speak our language?” I asked.

“Ah yes,” he said. “We have come across your kind before.”

“You... have?”

“Oh yes. Quite some time ago we encountered another human crew near this very location.”

“The crew of the UNSC Bear?” I asked.

“I believe that is where they said they were from. They were on a large shuttle craft when we came across them.”

“And you met with them long enough to learn our language?” I asked, astounded.

“Oh yes. They spent many cycles with us aboard this ship and back home. I was their primary contact.”

Which I guess is probably why I was talking with an engineer instead of the captain. Still, the fact that they had spent so much time with humans amazed me. But I had other business to get to.

“Engineer Lal, we recently met the Kuuuuug and heard about your past encounter with them.”

“And what did *they* have to say about it?” he asked.

“The people I talked with seemed to indicate that the leader at that time got greedy and many of your people died as a result.”

“They admitted that?” he asked. There was a long pause when I could hear him muttering to someone else. “Captain Amarz doesn’t believe that.”

“Please, I assure you it is true. It is for that reason that I refused to contact you on their behalf at first, but many of their people were angry with what the leader had done. They actually, uh, deposed him.” I said. “Violently.”

“One moment, Captain Monroe.” he said.

There was a very long moment of silence from his end. I imagined him there, explaining what I had said and discussing the issue with his captain.

“Captain, are you there?” Engineer Lal asked.

“I’m here.”

“Captain Amarz is happy to hear that, but he said it doesn’t make up for the horrendous way our people were treated.”

“I agree with you. The only thing I would ask is that you give us two weeks– fourteen, uh, cycles... to try to work something out. Some peaceful conclusion that–”

“No!” I heard a different voice shout out.

“Captain Amarz will not agree to that.” Engineer Lal reiterated.

“Give me a chance to try to find a solution.” I said. “Please. I don’t want more people to die over this.”

“Why should we give the Kuuuuug more chances to harm our people?”

“Please. Please give us a chance to at least talk this through. What’s the worst to happen? You can still attack after talking if you aren’t satisfied.”

There was mumbling on the other end. The Kuuuuug that were in the room all looked concerned about the conversation, but they clearly hadn’t understood any of what I or the Travelers had said. My own crew looked almost as concerned, though, and I think they had been listening very carefully.

“Three.” I finally heard Engineer Lal say.

“Three what?” I asked, confused at first. “Three days?”

“Yes, three cycles. The captain agreed to only that. If by then we don’t have an agreement then we destroy the Kuuuuug.”

“Let me talk to the Kuuuuug and see if they will agree to that timeline. I’ll be back in a moment with an answer.”

“They agree or not, three cycles.”

“I’ll tell them. Thank you.”

I took a few minutes to explain to Kuura Pa what the Travelers and I had talked about. I asked him if that would be enough time to come to an agreement among the elders about what to do. He agreed, saying it would have to be.

“Engineer Lal? Are you there?” I said. There was no response.

“Travelers, do you pick me up?”

“We’re here.” Engineer Lal said.

“If the Travelers will agree to hold off that long then the Kuuuuug and I will work on an agreement and get back to you.”

“Sagarazand.” Engineer Lal said.

“Sagara... what was that?”

“That is our people, the Sagarazand.”

“Sagarazand. Good. Thank you, Engineer Lal.”

“Call me Lal.” he said.

“I’m Callie.” I said.

“You’re Captain.” he said. “I shall refer to you as such.”

“Thank you, Lal. And please tell your captain thank you as well. I will contact you again tomorrow with an update of how progress is going.”

“Thank you Captain Monroe.”

I ended the conversation with the Sagarazand. It took a moment for my heart to stop beating at an increased rate. When it did, I turned to look at Kuura Pa.

“It’s up to you now.” I told him. “You need to explain this to the elders and come up with a solution.”

“Yes. I do best.” he told me.

—

We were in Kuura Pa’s office most of that day. It was incredibly boring. Sveta was a wonderful and well behaved child, but I could see the poor girl was getting antsy. I know I was.

“Hey Sveta,” I said, waving her over. “Want to play a game?”

“Okay.” she said, nodding.

“Well, um,” I glanced around, finally settling my eyes on a small statuette on Kuura Pa’s shelf. “You turn your head and count to twenty and I’ll hide this. We’ll have Ailanna time you. When you find it, I’ll count and you hide it. We’ll see who is quicker.”

She turned her eyes and began counting. It occurred to me just as she did that she may not be able to count to twenty, but she was a smart girl and did a great job. Meanwhile, I looked around for a place that was not too obvious, but easy enough. I wanted to challenge her a bit, but not discourage here.

“You can begin.” I told her, even though she was only to sixteen.

She turned and immediately ran across to the shelves where the statuette had been and began looking all over them, going so far as to start climbing.

“You’re very cold.” I told her.

“Sveta, don’t climb.” Dr. Gershawn told her. “Are you sure you should be doing that in here, Callie?” she asked.

“Eh, Kuura won’t care.” I told her. Then to Svetlana “Warmer. Warmer. Oh, I’m sorry, I meant colder.”

She laughed and spun in a different direction, listening to my warmer and colder hints, and occasionally ‘mess ups’, while she laughed and had fun.

And then it was her turn to hide it. I counted slowly, giving her plenty of time, and then when I began searching I made sure to check everywhere it wasn’t first, knowing the whole time that she had hidden it behind a book on the bottom shelf. I had seen that the book was moved when I turned.

“Who was quicker, Ailanna?” I asked, knowing full well what the answer was.

“She beat you by over a minute, I’m afraid.”

“Are you sure?!” I said, pretending to be upset. “Oh well, you beat me Sveta. Let’s go again. You hide it first this time.”

She beat me three straight times. She wanted to continue, but the constant giggling coming from Anna and Shauna was starting to get to me. I had Gina Preston take over my spot so I could go for a walk around the church.

It wasn’t long before Bao found me, sitting in the corner of the nave and trying not to cry.

“What’s going on, kiddo?” she asked, sliding to the floor next to me.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh. Try that on someone else. Now spill.”

I didn’t want to talk about it with her. I felt dumb. And scared. And justified for being jealous.

"I just... I... I think I've lost Anna, if we were ever really together." I couldn't believe I had admitted that to her.

"What? Oh that's silly."

"Have you seen her and Shauna together?"

"Anna has no interest in Shauna, kiddo. You're being silly. So what if they're friends?"

"I just think there's more than friends there, and... I thought she cared about me, but... maybe not anymore. It stinks!"

"I know how that feels. I lost my first love- my only love- to someone else."

"You did?" I asked.

Bao had never talked about her personal life in any detail to me before that. Never admitted that she had ever been in love.

"It was hell." she said, nodding. "But I survived. I was at least happy to see her happy."

"Her?"

"Oh. Well, yes, actually."

"I'm sorry. She should have stuck with you. You were the better choice."

"Maybe." she said, nodding. "But then again, if she had then you may not have been born, so I guess that wouldn't be so good either, kiddo."

The implication of what she had said took a moment to sink in, but when it did I was in total shock. My mother. She was talking about my mother.

"You... and... I mean..."

"Yeah," she said, blushing a little. "Eun-ji and I dated for a long time. I was going to marry her."

"I had no idea." I managed to mumbled.

"Because her and your dad didn't want you to know."

They didn't want me to know?! How could they keep something that important, that... epic... away from me?!

But at the same time, I knew it wasn't that epic. For me. I had parents who I loved, and they loved me. My mother's past love life was none of my business. And it wasn't exactly the kind of thing she'd tell a five year old, anyway.

"But you and mom we're still close... I mean..."

"After she dumped me for your father?" she asked. She snorted and turned back to look at me. "Yes. Not at first, of course. I was so hurt. So pissed at her. Pissed at Tim."

"How long did..."

"It was almost a year before we spoke after she told me she was leaving me." Bao said, wiping at one cheek. "I was so angry with her that I almost made a very bad decision, kiddo. I mean we were supposed to be together, not her and that bastard!" she said, her voice breaking.

"I'm sorry." I told her. I felt very torn.

"No, I am. Tim was a good guy, it wasn't his fault. And it was my fault they ever got close, actually."

"How so?" I asked, wanting her to continue.

"I wanted a child *so badly*, and I would talk about it with Eun-ji all the time. I even would talk about what we would name him or her."

"So you two were, um, looking for..."

"No. That was my hopes, but Eun-ji had no idea I was even thinking marriage, let alone that I was hoping her and your dad would get along well enough that he could help provide us with a child by getting her pregnant at the right time."

"Oh."

Okay, I really did not need to know she wanted my mom to sleep with someone other than her when they were dating. Or that they slept together, either. They *did*, right? I mean it would make sense if... I needed to stop thinking about this.

"I realized, *eventually*, that her and Tim were good together. He made her happy. And so my hopes of marrying her, of having a kid together..." Her eyes narrowed on me when she said that. "Well, at least she was happy. And it was all my fault, anyway."

All her fault. Wow. I couldn't believe she actually felt that way. I would have been so hurt that I don't know if I could have ever talked to her again.

"I can't believe nobody ever said anything."

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but I'm already ass deep, so I may as well continue, eh?" She said, chuckling. "I had this plan to propose to her. The idea was we would get married, have a kid, and be happy together. I waited too long, though."

"So she just... dumped you?" I asked, having trouble fitting

this in with the mother I always knew. “She met someone else and dumped you? She shouldn’t have treated you like that. I’m really sorry, Bao.”

“We were stupid kids who thought we were in love. It probably would have been a disaster, anyway. The fact that she so easily fell in love with him and out of love with me was just proof of that. We just weren’t meant to be together.”

“Still...” I said, and had nothing else to add to it. It was hard to feel angry that my mom had chosen my dad instead of Bao.

“Yeah, still.” she said.

We sat there silently for a long time. I had so many questions, but no way to ask them. No way to really even figure out precisely what it was that I wanted to ask, really.

“I shouldn’t tell you this,” she finally said. “And if I hadn’t already opened my big mouth so damn much, I wouldn’t. Your mother and I... the way... she contacted me when she was pregnant with you, and that’s how we wound up reconciling. They were discussing possible names, you see.” she said, nodding.

“So what does that have to do with—”

“She wanted to know if it was alright with me if she used one of the names I had talked about. Calliope was at the top of my list, and she just wanted my permission to use it.”

“*You* named me, then?” I asked.

“In a way.” she said, smiling.

There was too much information coming at me, and I couldn’t make sense of any of it. The one thing I was able to come up with I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to ask. But I needed to know.

“So...” I said, and I had to wait a moment because my voice stopped working. “So I was... supposed to be... um... *your* daughter, too?” I asked, my heart beating so hard I was sure she could hear it.

“You are their daughter, kiddo. They raised you, they made you who you are. They just used a name I chose.”

“You... *How can you even say that! She left you, and you were going to...*” And then another thought struck me. “You abandoned me!”

“Callie,”

“After... after...”

“When they died I was so heartbroken that I couldn’t be there for you, okay.” she said, wiping at her face again. “I did the best I could for you, I put you with the one person who was best situated to give you a good life.”

“But you could have taken me, you could have... could have?”

“Yes.” she said, nodding in agreement. “It’s what they wanted, actually. Both Tim and Eun-ji. They had left instructions to that extent.”

“And you didn’t.”

I felt so betrayed by her. Maybe I was *their* daughter, but she could have raised me. And I thought she *should* have.

“I couldn’t even bear to look at you, okay!” she said loudly. “All I ever saw when I looked at your tiny face was all that I lost. My God, Callie, I spent months-- years-- coming up with ways *every single day* to convince myself to hang on just one more day, that today was not the day to kill myself. I loved her so much, and losing her just... broke me.”

“But you had already--”

“Yes, but I could still see her.”

And I began to understand a little. At least she could see that mom was happy, that she was healthy and doing well. She could be a part of her life. Even if it wasn’t the way she wanted to be.

That’s more than I had growing up.

“There are a lot of days when I stare into space and pray that they come back, pray that this was all a tragic mistake, and that they will be there when I come by their quarters.” she explained.

“I... do that too.” I admitted. “I promise God that I’ll be a good girl, that if he brings them back I’ll do anything he wants.”

“It seems God, and every other deity, has forsaken us, kiddo.”

I couldn’t argue with that. It was true, I felt forsaken. Some days it seemed like the entire universe was pressing down on me, and I just wanted to curl up and die.

But on the other hand, I just wondered why I never knew all that. How had I not known Bao was supposed to be my mother? At least that it was her plan, even if it wasn’t Mom’s? How had I not been told?

“How did we get to this topic?” I asked, confused.

“You were telling me your girlfriend was breaking up with you, I think. But I think it is total BS, kiddo.”

“So, um, why didn’t you raise me?” I asked, scared of the real

answer. "Why leave me with Milton?"

"I told you, I was just trying to--"

"But you said for a few years, right? So how come you didn't take me in when you felt... stabilized, or whatever?"

"Well, I guess that's a fair question," she said. "I guess by the time I felt okay you were a precocious ten year old who had eyes on being captain before she was thirty."

"That long?" I felt suddenly sad for her and what all she had gone through. "I'm sorry."

She was silent for a minute, lost in her own thoughts on the subject. Maybe reliving some of the difficulties.

"Plus, Milton was doing a spectacular job. He treated you like a little princess, and you were getting every single opportunity you needed. I'd never be able give you anywhere near that kind of help or attention."

"Oh." I said. "I guess."

"Milton *did* treat you well, didn't he kiddo?"

"Oh yeah, he was wonderful." I told her. And for some reason I got sad about all I didn't get to have. "I was lonely, though," I said, tears beginning anew. "And I needed a mother that I could talk to, someone to teach me about... I don't know, *girl* things. Especially someone who would have understood all that I was feeling!"

"Sorry, kiddo." she said. "I guess I would have been a horrible mother. This is just proof."

"Even a horrible mother is better than no mother." I whined.

"Sorry I... just sorry."

She was sorry, but she could have been a mother. She could have been *my* mother. She was supposed to be. Yeah, not biologically, but it didn't matter. She wanted a child with Mom, and she could have had me after they died.

So why didn't she even try?

Instead she just abandoned me like they had.

"Am I supposed to call you Mom now or something?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood. "Because you can get that idea out of your head right now."

"Nope. Not your mother."

"Good." I told her. "So *what* are we?"

"Beats the hell out of me, kiddo." she said, shrugging. "I'm just

someone who loves you and would be grateful to be considered a close friend. If that's still possible."

"Yeah. Okay. Sure." I sighed. "Of course you are, Bao."

"Good. Thought I'd screwed that up."

"We're okay. But we better get back."

"Yes, Captain."

Back in the office with the others, I did my best not to look directly at Anna. I wasn't ignoring her, just not intentionally paying her any attention whatsoever. Mostly because it hurt to see her having so much fun with Shauna.

"Cuuul-A, we need." Horuun said.

"Need me for what?" I asked.

"Kuura Pa asked." he said, as if that explained anything. "I take."

I shrugged and followed him into the meeting room, where the entire group of elders were still gathered. They seemed to be waiting for me.

"Need decide." one of them shouted, Kre translating it for me with the tablet before everyone was shouting different things at me, all at the same time.

I wasn't sure what they wanted me to decide, but I did not have a very good feeling about it. Horuun led me to the raised dais and nodded to the crowd.

"I'm not..." began, then had to wait for everyone to quiet before continuing. "I'm not sure what it is you want me to decide, but I'll try to help if I can."

I stood there, staring at them for a long moment, but they were all staring off to my right. It took a moment before I realized they were waiting for their translator to read from the tablet that Kre was holding out to him and repeat it to them. But he hadn't, he was just staring at me.

"Go on." I told him, nodding.

He did so, but seemed very reluctant. Eventually they all nodded and one of them stood and began to speak.

"We need you decide leader." he said.

"I can't choose your leader for you." I told them.

"Must!" one demanded, then another repeated.

"Horuun, what is going on?" I asked him.

"Three decide. We try. Same count." he explained.

"There was a tie vote?" I asked. He nodded. "How am I supposed to decide for you?" I asked the crowd.

"Write ideas." one said, nodding to the interpreter.

Again the interpreter was very slow to respond, but he finally pulled a page of paper out and handed it to me. I looked down at it to only find writing I couldn't read. I handed it to Kre to see if she could do anything with it.

"This may take a while." she said.

Kre sat on the floor, then laid the paper beside her and began tapping away at the tablet screen. Everyone was staring at us, but they seemed content to wait. Eventually she stood and handed me the tablet.

I tried to be fair. I tried to think of what I knew would make a great leader. I felt completely and entirely unqualified to choose the leader for an entire race of people, but I was stuck.

Reading through the list told me very little, not even the names of the three candidates. They all had various ideas about social programs, about money policy, about the role of government in the daily lives of citizens. The first and third, though, supported standing strong against the Travelers– the Sagarazand, though the third was more reasonable. The only one who agreed to complete apology and offer of reparations was candidate two.

"The only way this is going to work with the Sagarazand is if you offer a full apology and try to offer up some kind of payment to ease things over." I told the group.

The translator took a moment before he repeated what I had said, but he seemed to give it more anger and vehemence than what I had said. Sort of a 'I told you this was a waste' attitude.

"Number two is the only one who will do anything like that." I told them.

He translated that, again giving it a lot of attitude. Some of them seemed to complain, though Kre didn't give me any translation of what they had said, but she did tell me that some were supportive. And she told me when one of them stood and agreed that Kuura Pa should be leader now, that they had all agreed to let me choose, and this was my choice. I gather that he had originally supported the first candidate, but I can't say for certain.

I had unknowingly appointed Kuura Pa as their leader. I was actually quite happy about that. He seemed to be the only one who I had met who seemed to understand the scale of the wrong their prior leader had committed. He was the only one I thought could stand a chance of gaining a peaceful resolution.

So this was yet another thing on my shoulders. Now I was not only responsible for saving all of humanity, but because I had chosen their leader and was working as emissary for the Kuuuuug, I was now responsible for saving them as well. Not to mention the bomb that Bao had thrown me, or the fact that I was losing my girlfriend and sole reason for living.

Stress was high.

There was a moment there, at the dais, that I felt my legs go wobbly and I worried I'd fall down, but I knew I had to pull it together. It was a lot for a sixteen year old to handle, but there were a lot of people depending on me, so I had to step it up.

I could burst my aneurysm later.

Chapter Seven

Horuun woke us in the morning for breakfast. There was food that resembled eggs, but not from a chicken, as well as some kind of soup that smelled fishy. I, of course, did not eat any of it. Neither did Svetlana, who joined me in eating only some of the fruit.

Anna hadn't sat next to me at the meal, and I took that as another sign that I had lost her. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I couldn't let myself look so weak in front of the others. Not when they were relying on me to lead.

I was exhausted. I had lain awake most of the previous night. That alone wasn't all that rare for me, I usually slept very little, but it had been a trying few days and I was physically worn out. If Anna had been laying beside me, comforting me, then possibly I would have overcome my racing thoughts and would have slept. Instead she slept a meter from me, snoring just barely loud enough to remind me she was there, but not next to me.

What had my mind reeling the previous night was what Bao had told me. My mother and her were a couple. Were together. Were presumably lovers. All this time I had thought they were best friends, but it turned out that they were so much more. Bao was supposed to be with her, to help raise me, to make me her own. Bao wanted to have a child with Mom, wanted to have *me*. She could have raised me, could have had the daughter she longed so much for.

Instead I ended up with Timothy A. Monroe.

I don't even know what the A stood for. Maybe nothing? I had been through every record on the ship—on Freedom— and had never seen any that told his middle name. The only records I hadn't been able to get to were his archived medical records, and the only reason I couldn't get to some of those is because they were saved on a storage media and packed away, not on any of the servers. In retrospect I probably could have accessed that media, had I wanted to. I *was* the

head of systems.

How different would life had been if I had been raised by Bao and my mother, instead of my mom and dad? I wondered. But how different would Bao have been had her and Mom stayed together and had a child? Would she be the harsh, driven engineer she turned out to be, or would she have been softer and more... I don't know, loving? I had no idea, but things turned out the way they turned out, and I loved my parents and the childhood they had given me. There was really no point in dwelling on what might have been.

Not like I could stop, though.

We had to sit through another service at the church just after lunch. It was boring for me, and horrible for Svetlana. She wiggled around, unable to stay still, through the whole thing. I felt bad for her, but there wasn't a lot I could do to help.

The service this time was to ask their gods for guidance to help make peace with the Sagarazand. There was another fire, more chanting, more people lighting the ends of long poles before making their way out of the church.

After yet another meal– these people really did like to eat– we were shown back to Kuura Pa's office to speak with him.

When Kuura Pa came in he looked tired. I'm not sure why I thought that, I had no way to know exactly what the Kuuuuug looked like when they were tired, but he did look tired to me. And stressed.

So I wasn't the only one.

"Kuuuuug not agree gift." he said.

"What does that mean?" Chief Kouri asked.

"Some not want give much, some want."

"So you just can't agree on the total to offer for reparations?"

Dr. Gershawn asked.

"Not." he said, obviously agreeing.

"I thought they were picking you as leader?" I asked. "Doesn't that mean you can decide?"

"Kuuuuug change. Leader need agree from other on this pay." he explained.

"Great, well... convince them, Kuura Pa! You need to make them understand."

“Kuura try. Kuura try more.”

“Do that.” I said, sounding angry and not meaning to.

Wonderful. They couldn’t even agree about offering reparations when it was pretty clear that was the only thing that was going to save their lives! I was so angry, and yet mostly disappointed. So disappointed.

And scared.

If those people couldn’t come to an agreement they would be destroyed. Completely and utterly eliminated. Wiped out of existence.

And us along with them.

I still didn’t have any idea whether or not the other humans were real. Sure, both the Kuuuuug and Sagarazand had said they were, and we had the tablet as evidence, but I still had my doubts. How did we know the tablet didn’t get there some other way? Sure, it seemed likely that someone claiming to be human had been there, but that did not mean they actually *were* human.

But then again, the Kuuuuug had recognized us as human, so maybe it did mean there were real humans there. That didn’t mean the humans were anywhere now. Maybe their ship blew up like the Freedom did. Or maybe they all died when they landed on a moon or planet and there was some kind of poisonous compound in the air.

If I only knew the real truth...

There wasn’t a long wait after Kuura Pa went back to the meeting room before Horuun hurried in to talk to me.

“You speak Travelers. They speak now.”

I was hurried in to where the radio was, and Horuun held a chair out for me to sit at in front of it. He handed me the microphone with a look that seemed anxious.

“Lal, are you there?” I said. “This is Callie.”

“Captain!” Lal’s voice came, happy and strong. “So good to hear from you again.”

“How are you, Lal?” I asked.

“Good Captain. Do you have good news for me to take to

Captain Amarz today?" he asked.

"Well..." No, I really didn't have much good news. At least not the kind they wanted to hear. "The Kuuuuug have chosen a new leader, and they are currently working out the details for a formal apology," I hoped- I hadn't spoken to Kuura Pa about that part. "And I believe they will have some offer for reparations soon as well."

"They have nothing yet?" he asked.

"They are making progress." I promised, my palms sweating.

"Yes, progress. They understand there is little time?"

"I have made it clear."

"Make it clearer, Captain. Please. Captain Amarz *will* attack. It's a matter of honor for the Sagarazand. But I don't want the Kuuuuug to all suffer because of horrible leaders."

"Neither do I, Lal."

Not to mention the fact that I was scared that we would also be destroyed in the process.

"Can you tell me more about the other humans?" I asked him.

"Other humans? Oh, yes, absolutely." he told me. There was a long delay. "What would you like to know?"

"When did you meet them?"

"We met them a long time ago."

"But where did you actually come across them?" I persisted.

"It was near your planet." he said.

"Near... Earth?" I asked, completely certain I had misheard him.

"Yes, oh..." I heard voices in the background. "That is... no, I meant... of course it was... here, I mean. Near the... planet you are now on, of course."

His answer left me unsettled. He didn't seem certain. Perhaps it was his lack of familiarity with our language. Even though he spoke it well, it wasn't his native tongue. Perhaps that was the cause of his mistake, but it did not feel right. And he sounded uneasy.

"So when did you see them last?"

"Oh that was... I saw them not... it was many cycles ago." he stuttered. "Many times many."

"I see. Was that back at your home? Are they still there?"

"They departed from us before we reached our home."

"I thought he said before that they came back to their home?" Kre asked.

"So did I." I said, making sure I didn't have the button pressed.

Something did not quite add up, but I didn't know if it was him being intentionally misleading, or if it was still part of him just not quite completely understanding English. Or even just us feeling paranoid.

"Captain?" he asked.

"Oh, yes Lal." I said, verifying I had the button pushed. "A member of my crew just asked me something and I had to speak with her. I will contact you with another update tomorrow, if that would be acceptable? And perhaps you could tell us more about your time with the other humans. I'm dying to know more about them."

"Yes, that sounds acceptable. I look forward to what news you may bring us."

That evening was very tense. Not just for us, but for the Kuuuuug. I could see it in those around us. I did not like the way they were looking. Almost like they had given up and were preparing for the end. The church was full of Kuuuuug, all seeming to pray– and I could guess why. Early in the evening a scout from the Sagazarand flew low enough across the sky to be visible to the naked eye. People were terrified of what was coming.

Sveta cried uncontrollably that night. She was a very well behaved child usually, but not that night. She threw tantrums, screamed, and cried all evening and throughout that night. I couldn't get her to be quiet, Anna couldn't, Ailanna couldn't. Even Shauna tried, though somehow her attempt turned into a profanity laced plea that Bao cut off. Eventually the doctor gave her something to calm her and put her to sleep, but by then we all had our stress levels bumped up a few levels.

Late that night Kuura Pa came in. He looked exhausted– *beyond* exhausted– and worried. I got the distinct feeling that I hadn't done him any favors in throwing my support behind him as their new leader.

"Elders agree apology. Elders agree food and fuel to Travelers send home."

"So you think you're just going to apologize, give them enough fuel to get back home, and that will be that?" Ensign Debartolo asked.

"Sounds like a shitty deal to me." Shauna added. "Oops, sorry we blew your friends all to hell, but here's enough fuel to get away from us, now don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out."

“Kuura agree.” he said. “Kuura try, elders no hear.”

“I can’t present that to them.” I told him. “It’s not enough. They aren’t going to agree to that.”

Who would? For once Shauna was right, it was terrible. It was like they were showing them the door and telling them to have a nice trip. That wasn’t the right way to make peace, and we all knew it. Even Kuura Pa knew it.

“Cuuul-A try? Cuuul-A speak Travelers?” he asked. It sounded more like he was begging, though.

“Kuura Pa, I just don’t think this is going to do it.” I told him.

“Only achievement Cuuul-A. Must?”

I sighed and looked around at my crew. I was so tired of being the one to make the decisions. If I told the Sagarazand what the Kuuuuug had agreed on they would be attacking within the hour, I imagined. If I didn’t, what then? Could we force the Kuuuuug to do more?

“Bao?” I asked.

“Your call, kiddo.”

“What would you do?”

“I don’t know. I’d probably ask my Captain to make the decision.” she said, smiling.

“I don’t know either. Neither telling them or not telling them are good options. Does anyone have an idea? Ashley?”

“You’re the one to make this decision.” Kre said. “I trust whatever you decide.”

“Since when? It wasn’t that long ago that you questioned everything I said, did, and ordered. Everyone did. So what changed?”

“You stepped up.” she said. She seemed sincere.

“What does that mean?”

“You stopped running to Captain Nelson over every thing, you stopped whining, and you stopped ignoring your more experienced junior officers.”

“You started leading.” Ensign Debartolo said.

“People respect that.” Anna added.

“Even you?” I asked Anna. She turned away. “Be that as it may, I’ve made nothing but horrible decisions, and... I just...” I knew it wasn’t very captain-like, but I felt myself starting to cry. “I don’t want to screw up anymore.”

“Hey, we support you, Kiddo.” Bao said.

“Why?!” I snapped at her. “Because I’m practically your

daughter? Would you still support me if I wasn't supposed to be yours and Mom's, instead of hers and Dad's? If I was just some random kid who had the weird luck to end up in charge?"

"What the hell'd she just say?" Shauna asked everyone.

"That is *not* anyone's business!" Bao said. "And it has nothing to do with—"

"It's my business!" I shouted, rising to my feet. "Nobody ever told me! Mom and Dad never told me, and when they were gone you just went on being *Aunt Bao*. Well didn't anyone think it would matter to me? All this time I had no family—"

"Milton was your family." she said.

"So were you, Bao. Only you wouldn't be."

"This isn't the time for this."

"You're right." I said.

I ran a hand through my hair to brush it back from my face, then sat again, turning to look at Kuura Pa. He looked very confused, but was waiting patiently. This was most definitely not the time to crack. I realized then that cracking was exactly what I was doing. The pressure was getting to me. A deep breath and I felt better.

"Tomorrow morning, then?" I said to him. "Can you have an official apology ready by then? If so, I can talk to the Sagarazand for you."

"Many appreciation." he said in agreement.

With his agreement the conversation had ended. He left the room, and a moment later I went out as well. I needed to take a walk and think about things. I needed to clear my head. Except I couldn't, Anna had followed me.

"Callie, stop!" she yelled out.

We had made our way out into the nave by then, and there were some Kuuuuug sitting in their version of pews. Several of them turned toward us, clearly not happy with our disturbance.

"I can't handle all of this!" I said, trying not to get too loud.

"Yes you can." she said.

"So many lives depend on me. I just... I can't... and then... I mean you and Shauna seem to be... whatever, and I just... don't even know—"

"What about me and Shauna?" she asked, looking surprised.

"You two have been getting along awfully well." I told her.

“Yeah. So?” she said, looking confused.

“What do you mean, so?!” I asked.

The only reason I originally decided to come on this journey, to lead this mission, was because of her. I needed to make sure she was safe. Yes, in the end I was convinced to come even if she wasn’t, but I would never have agreed in the first place if it wasn’t for my concern for her. She had to survive. Period! While I wasn’t sure I was the best person to ensure that, I knew I’d never rest in peace with the rest of the Freedom’s crew if I didn’t know she had made it.

“I... the only reason I’m here is to... I mean... I came because I...” I stammered. “And I insisted on you coming! I mean... not that you owe me, or... I just—”

“Owe you?” she said. She stepped back. “Seriously? What, now I’m supposed to be indebted to you to the point that I have to—”

“No!” I shouted.

“Really, Callie!”

“It’s just... I love you.”

“Yeah, well... you have a strange way of showing it sometimes.”

She turned and walked off, leaving me there alone to face the scornful looks of all the Kuuuuug who were wanting quiet for their prayers.

Their prayers. That was when I sat and really looked at them. All the Kuuuuug. All they had left were their prayers. They were overmatched by the Sagarazand, and they knew it. They could trust that their leaders would come up with a way to save them, but their experiences from the past did not give them confidence enough to ease their worries.

And that is why I had to make both the Kuuuuug leaders and the Sagarazand see that peace was in everyone’s best interest, no matter what it took to achieve.

—

In the morning I again was called to talk to the Sagarazand by Horuun, this time with Kuura present. Two days down, time running out, and I didn’t have a good feeling when I saw Horuun that morning.

"No more." Kuura said. "Apologize."

"What do you mean, no more? Kuura Pa—"

"Not agree!" he bellowed loudly, clearly angry. "Kuura try. Kuura sorry."

"You know that won't be enough." I told him.

"Kuura try. Kuura fail."

"Try harder!" I shouted.

"Elders no speak Kuura." he said, looking very downcast.

"Cuuul-A try speak Travelers."

"They won't agree to this."

"Cuuul-A try." he said.

I couldn't. I wouldn't. I was so angry with him that there was no way that I was going to make another offer that would be refused. I would not make an offer that would only anger the Sagarazand and be the cause of their attack.

"No." I told him.

"Cuuul-A speak!" he demanded.

"No!" I shouted back. "I'm not going to go back on that radio and ask them to attack us. If you want to do it, you do it, but I won't."

"Cuuul-A—"

"We're all going to die!" I told him. "All because your stupid elders are being stubborn, and... and..." I had to stop to let out a quick sob. "I can't take this. I... it never ends! Nobody should have this much... and I... I can't... I just can't."

"Callie," Bao said, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"No!" I shouted. "I won't do it, Bao! I... I can't. Please don't make me. Please don't ask... I can't be the one responsible anymore."

I stormed out of the room, away from all of my crew. When Anna tried to grab onto me, I shoved her away and ran off. I was out of the building and around a corner before any of them had time to stop me. I ran down short alleys and paths that were so narrow I could barely pass. Eventually I felt safe to stop.

That was when I allowed myself to curl into a ball and cry. I mean *really* cry. I don't think I have ever cried so freely. Before that, even when I was a child, I had always made an effort to control myself. I usually failed when I was young, but I had tried. But that day I let it go. And I think it may have been over half an hour before I ran out of tears.

In the sky I could see small scout ships flying over the city, doing quick zigzags. Sagarazand ships prepping for their attack, I knew. The scouts were looking for anti-aircraft weaponry, perhaps. Or maybe for vulnerable places for the first strike. They may even have been trying to terrorize the citizens, I don't know.

I spent a few minutes thinking about how I wanted to spend the ending moments of my life, however long that was. Not with my girlfriend, whom I had already lost. Not with my crew, whom I had so badly let down in my attempts and promises to save their lives. So I would die alone.

I tilted my head up at the sky and thought of my parents. They were the only real thing I wanted, the only real thing that would comfort me as death fell upon me. I tried to take solace in the fact that I would join them soon, hopefully. If the beliefs of most religions about the afterlife were true, anyway.

"I'll be with you soon, Mom and Dad." I told the sky. "Mom, you have some explaining to do about Bao." I said, managing to laugh. "And I did not wet myself, Dad, so I expect an apology."

There were screams from the Kuuuuug nearby as a scout ship sailed overhead again. There was a sound and I looked over in time to see several of them racing past the opening at the end of my path.

And that was when it was decided. I'd have to go try. I couldn't let all these people— all my crew as well— down without at least putting up a fight.

And so I rose to my feet and started toward the end of the alley.

I was lost.

I ran past Kuuuuug who were trying to escape, some jostling into me and looking at me with hate in their eyes. I knew, even then, that many of them blamed us for what was coming. And at that point, with what I had assumed had happened in my absence— namely that someone else from my crew had made the connection with the Sagarazand— I could hardly disagree with them. Though the main culprit in my eyes were the elders.

A Kuuuuug child threw a rock at me, clipping my leg. I spun in their direction in time to see him raising another rock. Beside the child stood an adult, who looked every bit as though they may join in with what the child was doing. I turned my back to them and ran as hard as I could away from them.

Unfortunately that got me even more lost.

I ran around the city for at least half an hour, every minute just waiting for the bombs to start falling. It was difficult to run with my eyes on the sky and still try to find my way in their city. Despite that, I did manage to come across a fountain that I recognized, and from there was able to find the building where we met the leader, where the radio was.

Unfortunately I couldn't get inside. There was a gigantic crowd trying to shove their way in. I had no idea what to do. More and more ships were swooping down over the city, terrorizing people, and I was in danger of being trampled by the people who were trying to shove into the last sanctuary they could find. I don't know, if I were them I'd think it was safer anywhere but the one building that represented the government, but what did I know?

My chances of doing anything to help were dimming. I had to find some way to contact the Sagarazand, but I knew I'd never get back to our ship in time to try to use our radio. I still wouldn't even be sure they could communicate on our signals if I did. But I couldn't just abandon my crew there. And I couldn't abandon the Kuuuuug.

"Bao!" I shouted. "Anna,"

The large group who were trying to shove their way inside all seemed to turn their triple eyes on me, glaring. I almost turned and ran, but I couldn't.

"I need in there!" I said emphatically.

They growled and grumbled at me, and I will admit that it scared me quite a bit. But I had nothing left to lose. I'd die if I did nothing, so being killed by them because I was trying to do *something* seemed less intimidating than it might otherwise.

"Get out of the way, I'm trying to save you!"

I tried shoving past them, but was pushed back at first, then knocked to the ground. Several of the Kuuuuug looked like they may become quite violent if I were to try again, but I didn't see a choice.

"Out of the way!" I screamed at them, trying once again to shove my way past them.

I felt a hand grab my arm and I was wrenched back from the scrum, dragged several steps away and nearly falling in the process.

"Let me--"

"Cuuul-A!" Horuun snapped at me.

He waved his hand in the direction of the side of the building, then guided me toward it, still holding my arm tightly.

"Horuun, we don't have time for this." I told him, knowing he didn't understand at all. "Stop!"

Suddenly he did stop. In front of a door. He stepped away from me, shoving the door open and beckoning me inside, where he quickly led me to the radio room, where all my crew were gathered, along with Kuura Pa.

"What did you tell them?" I asked the crowd in general, not sure who did the talking but sure someone had said something that had agitated the Sagarazand.

"Just what Kuura Pa told us." Bao answered. "It didn't go over so well."

"Sure as hell didn't." Shauna muttered, shaking her head. "I'm going to get my ass blown off because of these shitbrains."

"Give me the radio." I said, stepping toward it.

I lowered myself into the chair and grabbed onto the microphone. I had no clue what to say, but I knew I had to at least try to stop them long enough to give me time to try to convince the Kuuuuug to offer more.

"Lal, are you there?" I asked. "Lal, this is Captain Monroe, please answer." I waited a moment, but there wasn't an answer. "Lal, Captain Amarz, please give me just a moment. Lal? I have a new offer!" I shouted.

"Callie, you can't do that." Kre said.

"Captain, how nice to hear from you." Lal said. "I do apologize

that we do not have more time, however.”

“Lal, call off the attack!” I begged him.

“I’m afraid it is too late for that, Captain. I do apologize.”

“But we have a new offer!”

“The time for offers has passed, I’m afraid.”

“They are willing to fill your ships with fuel and food, and give a very decent price on goods in the future. Please, they would make great trading partners for your people. You don’t want to turn that down!”

I had no idea what I was offering, but I knew I needed to up the amount over what they had previously offer. At that point I didn’t really care what it cost the Kuuuuug, they would just have to agree. That, or die.

“How good of a price on future goods?” Lal asked. I could hear Captain Amarz talking to him in their language in the background.

“And for how long?”

“Very good!” I shouted in the microphone. “And for...” I had to make a realistic goal or they’d think the Kuuuuug were making offers to buy time to prepare a defense, and weren’t planning to follow through. “They’d agree to five years. That’s... like, fifteen hundred cycles.” I told him, knowing he wouldn’t know how long a year was for us and needing to convey a reasonable translation of the time.

“Two thousand.” Lal said.

“Yes, okay, sure.” I agreed.

“We need to know the price we’d get, and what kind of goods they can provide.”

“Definitely. Only that would take a long time and require in person negotiations. If you just stop the attack now, you can enter into negotiations and attack later if those don’t go well for you. Please, just stop the attack.”

There was a long pause– like over a full minute- then I could hear mumbling and angry shouts on the radio.

“Agreed.” Lal said. I breathed a sigh of relief. “For now.”

“Of course.”

“But Captain Amarz wants to send down a negotiating team this evening to begin talks.”

“Absolutely!” I shouted, and found myself leaping up from the seat in joy. “Thank you so much, Lal. And you too, Captain Amarz.”

“Captain Amarz would like to meet you some time, if possible, Captain Monroe.”

“Me? Uh... sure, of course.”

“I would like to meet you in person as well, Captain. I am interested in hearing about how you convinced the Kuuuuug to make this offer.”

So was I. At that point all I knew is that I had stopped the attack for the time being, but I also knew the work was not done. If Kuura Pa wasn't able to convince the elders to go along with what I just proposed then this was all just a temporary stay of execution.

“Kuura tried.” he told me, after Kre finished explaining everything through the interpreter.

“You have to!” I told him. “Or we will all die.”

“Elders not speak Kuura again.”

“They won't talk to you at all?” I asked.

“Not this.”

“Then... then take me in there, I'll talk to them.”

He told Horuun to send for the elders and have them assemble in the meeting chamber. I made sure he knew to tell them to hurry.

Chapter Eight

“What will you say?” Bao asked me. We were waiting in the meeting room for the elders to gather.

“No idea.” I told her. I was shaking, and I felt an urgent need to use the bathroom. “Any suggestions?”

“Just speak from your heart, kiddo.”

“No suggestions at all for your almost daughter, then?” I asked, still hurt that she had never told me about her and Mom.

“Will you stop that!?” she said, upset with me. “I was never going to be your mother, Callie. Your mother was never going to be with me, we were never going to have a child.”

“But you said--”

“Your mother told me later that she would never have married me, that she never would have wanted a kid with me. She said she had been trying to tell me for a long time that she didn’t feel the same for me as I did her.”

“But... you said--”

“I know what I said.” she snapped. “That was the plan *I* had. Turns out she had had misgivings about us for a very long time, but she was trying to find a way to not hurt me.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a very long time ago.”

“So Mom and Dad...”

“Eun-ji had only met him after I set it up, and she had no idea why I wanted so badly for her to meet him.”

“So you really never were going to be my mother?” I asked.

“Afraid not.” she said, grunting. “But I would have been proud to be.” she told me, managing a small smile.

“Well,” I told her, straightening up because the elders were beginning to enter the room. “I can still call you Aunt Bao, right?”

“If you like.” she agreed. “Show time, kiddo.”

I stepped to the front of the room as the full group of elders made their way to seats. None of them appeared happy to be there, and none of them looked like they wanted to see my face.

I stared out at them, unsure of myself to a level I hadn't ever really felt. It wasn't like the usual, where I felt like others may know more, or like the times where I was pretty sure I was right, but not confident enough to claim it. This was more like I was a tiny child standing in front of the adults to tell them I knew all about what it was like to be a parent, raise a child, and have grandchildren. A complete fraud.

"So, um," I said, and I turned to the translator, who just stared at me blankly. Kre had come in with the translator, but she hadn't copied what I had just said onto the tablet for him. I was grateful. "So," I said, taking a deep breath. "You saw the ships," I told them, and I waited for Kre and the translator to convey this to them. "And you know the Sagarazand *will* destroy you if you don't agree to their terms."

There were grunts of disagreement and anger on their faces. But I knew it was necessary for them to know what I had agreed to in their place.

"So, like, they have accepted your apology, as long as it comes along with... um, so like... you're going to have to give them a bunch of supplies, and you're going to have to give them a massive discount on future trades."

When the translator finished there were loud, angry shouts in their language. I stepped back from the microphone, scared, as several elders stood and gestured toward me as they boomed their disagreement.

"Plow on, kiddo." Bao said in my ear. "You've got this."

"Right." I said to her, and I stepped back forward. What would Milton do, I asked myself. "Sit down and shut up!" I shouted.

Milton would not back down. He was almost always calm, and he rarely let his anger show in public, but if he had been faced with this then he would take control of the situation no matter what it took. And it was going to take anger and surety.

"Do you want to die?" I asked loudly.

And that was what got through to them, at least a little. They stopped yelling and began to listen, though they did not return to their seats.

“That’s what is going to happen if you don’t listen to me.” I told them in a more calm voice. “So given the options of death or finding a new trade partner, I think the new trade partner is preferable.

They listened as I laid out what I had agreed to, and I ended it all by explaining to them that it could actually end up being quite a lucrative deal for them, if the Sagarazand came that way often. And it would really cost them almost nothing if the Sagarazand didn’t come by often. I had no idea if what I was saying was true, but it sounded good and the thought of a profit seemed to please them.

After a very lengthy back and forth with them about what would be a reasonable discount to give them-- and what it really meant anyway, considering they hadn’t actually traded with anyone before-- we came to a conclusion: they would offer goods at a twenty five percent markup over what each city in their society charges each other for the same item, and then let the Sagarazand negotiate back down to the actual cost they charge each other. On top of that, they would strengthen their apology, offering to pay a fixed sum to each family in reparations, and making it clear that their former leader did not speak for them and was no longer around.

The meeting went on past midnight, had lasted through three meals and snacks. In the end, though, we had settled everything up pretty well and everyone seemed to leave fairly satisfied. Not thrilled, some of them, but satisfied. I was dead tired when I made my way back into the room my crew and I would be sharing for the night.

“You did good in there, kiddo.” Bao told me, patting me on the back.

“I’m so proud of Sweet Little Callie.” Anna said, smiling. “You really held your own against all of them.”

“You saved my lazy ass, so... props.” Shauna told me, holding up her hand to wait for a fist bump that would never come.

“Thanks guys.” I told them. I meant it, but it still felt like I was just making up-- partly-- for getting everyone into the mess to begin with. “I need sleep and a shower. Actually, just the sleep.”

I laid out the blanket I would be sleeping on and prepared to go to sleep. As I stretched out on the floor I glanced across the room, where I saw Anna and Shauna talking quietly to each other and laughing. Again. It was hard to get to sleep, seething with jealousy as I

was, but I managed after a while.

—

I woke to a hand gripping mine. In the half asleep daze I had smiled and assumed that it was Anna. Sadly, it only took my waking mind a moment to realize the hand was much too small to be hers.

When my eyes opened I found a very small girl curled up beside me. I glanced around the room as far as I could without turning my head and didn't see anyone else around. I very carefully raised my head enough to check behind me, hoping Anna was there beside me, but she wasn't. Neither was anyone else.

At some point that morning, while I was still sleeping, the rest of my crew had abandoned Svetlana and myself. Apparently Sveta had woken and made her way to my side before falling asleep again. I wondered where my crew had gone, but seeing Svetlana asleep there kept me from getting up. I didn't want to wake her.

Before long Kre came in to wake us, anyway. Sveta did not wake immediately, stirring and whining, but when she was fully aware she widened her eyes.

"I need to potty," she whined, sounding much younger than her four years.

"Go on, Callie, I'll take care of her," Kre told me.

"Thanks, Ensign," I said.

"Hey, uh, Callie," she said. "We're not really using the ranks anymore, are we?" she quickly added "I mean unless there is something big going on, of course? I mean if you would rather I call you Captain I can, I just--"

"Oh. Right. I mean Ashley, sorry."

"Is it okay if I call you Callie? I mean if it's not--"

"Of course it is."

"Right," she said. "Thanks."

"I need to—" Svetlana said.

"Right!" Kre said, scooping Sveta into her arms. "Let's find a toilet."

"Good luck," I told them, meaning it. They were hard to come by around there. Plus, their version wasn't quite as... convenient as ours.

"Oh, and Callie?" Kre said.

"Yes?"

“Bao is out front. She wanted to talk to you.”

“Thanks, Ensi... Ashley.”

It felt weird to call her that, even though I had on a lot of occasions before. But it kind of seemed like we were becoming friends, and that was something I didn't have a ton of in my life. But it really felt like Ashley was becoming someone I was close to, someone I could completely trust in.

Bao was sitting in a pew, waiting for me. She smiled and patted the seat beside her when she saw me. I made my way over to her and sat.

“The Sagarazand representatives came earlier than expected.” she told me, sounding happy at the surprise.

“That's good?” I asked.

“They were greeted very nicely, actually.” she said. “It went very well. And I spoke to them for a while, since you weren't available.”

“Oh really?” I asked, not sure if I was happy or upset about that. “Lal?” I asked.

“Yes, he was there. The only one I could talk to, actually. He translated for the rest of them. He's a nice guy.”

“Good.”

“Mostly,” she said, nodding. “But maybe you could have a talk with Shauna? I tried, but she doesn't seem to want to listen to me.”

“Why?” I asked, afraid now. “What happened?”

“It's just her mouth. She called the Sagarazand, and I quote, ‘shitface’. And Lal seemed to understand it, too. And she had several other negative comments, calling them bastards among other things.” “And *you* couldn't shut her up? What makes you think I'll be able to?”

Wow, if Bao couldn't shut her down with her stern attitude, I didn't know how I could. I was pretty doubtful, actually.

“She respects you more.” Bao told me.

“You've got to be kidding!” I said.

“Nope.”

That was an odd thought. Who could ever respect me more than they did Bao? I found the thought ridiculous, but shrugged it off.

“So, anyway kiddo,” Bao said. “Engineer Lal has invited us to go along with them when they leave in a few days.”

“He... he what? We just got here, so I guess we’ll have to nicely turn him—”

“I told him yes.” she said. “I mean I said I’d have to discuss it with you, of course, Captain.”

“We can’t go, Bao.” I told her. “We found our new home, okay.” I told her.

“But he said he’d take us to the crew of the Bear.” she argued. “He did?”

There was something intriguing about that. And so wrong. I didn’t know why, but it gave me some kind of horrible feeling. I couldn’t explain it.

“No, Bao. It’s a bad idea.”

“Sounded like a pretty damn good idea to me.” she said.

Maybe she was right, I thought. Maybe all my misgivings were just unease of the unknown. But these were the people who were five seconds from bombing the Kuuuuug into oblivion and us along with them. Plus, something in the inconsistencies from Lal did not sit well with me.

Everything I had done, all the decisions I had made and all the bad moves, had done nothing to help my crew, anyway. I was always supposed to be the one with really good instincts, but my instincts weren’t good enough to save the Freedom, weren’t good enough to find this place sooner, and weren’t good enough to keep Colton alive. I was not as smart, not as instinctive as everyone thought. Me included.

“We’ll discuss it with the crew. This is something everyone should decide together.” I told her.

“If you say so, kiddo.”

I still hadn’t even met Lal, I realized. Maybe it would be good to meet these people before making any decisions about whether to trust them. Besides, he and Captain Amarz had wanted to meet me in person.

And so it was with that thought that I had her lead me to the Sagarazand, so I could meet them. We brought the rest of the crew with us, as well. Everyone should meet these people, I figured.

The Sagarazand were slightly taller and thinner than most people, all with a dark brown skin that was loose and hung in

wrinkles on all parts of their exposed bodies. And while they had the familiar, human number of arms and legs, their hands each had four fingers and no thumbs. Their eyes were large compared to ours, and their noses were quite wide, dominating above their small mouths. There was no hair on top of their heads, but they did have bushy, bright white sideburns. Their clothes looked like some kind of shiny, plastic material, and were in various bright colors that ranged from fluorescent orange to bright magenta, as well as a variety of other bright hues.

“You are Captain Monroe?” one of them said. “I am Engineer Lal. It is a pleasure to meet you, Captain.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Lal.” I said.

He extended his hand to shake. I didn’t know if this was universal, or if it was just something they had learned from the crew of the Bear. Either way, his hand felt like a soft leather, and he had a soft grip as he shook, though the lack of thumb made his grip feel a bit...off, somehow.

“May I introduce Captain Amarz.” he said, stepping aside and gesturing toward a heavier, more adorned man.

“Captain, so good to meet you.” I said, smiling at him.

“Captain.” he managed, bowing his head in my direction. He went on to make several sounds that I imagined were words, but couldn’t understand.

“Ah, Captain Amarz would ask that you excuse him, he has other duties to attend to at this time, and he has asked me to extend all regards to you and your crew.”

“Thank you, Captain Amarz.” I said, nodding.

“Captain.” Captain Amarz said, bowing his head again.

We chatted with Lal while my crew and his settled in around the room. He asked about our morning, I asked about his trip here. Small talk.

“It still amazes me how well you speak English.” I said. “How is that possible?”

“Ah, well,” he told me, smiling. “I spent a lot of time learning from the other humans.”

“How long did it take you, do you think, to be able to just have a regular conversation? You must be a quick learner, because it takes humans years to learn to speak well.”

“It took quite some time.” he said, his eyes scrunching. “But I’d

rather talk about you. Can I ask how you managed to convince the Kuuuuug to make a deal?" he asked.

"I really don't know, Lal. I think they just realized they had to do it to make up for their former leader's mistakes." I told him.

"Oh it was much more than that. She was very forceful with them." Bao told him.

"She was awesome." Anna added.

She was smiling at me. That heartwarming, disarming smile that I fell in love with. I wasn't sure if she was boasting on her girlfriend, or being supportive of her captain in the face of an outside group.

"So tell me about the crew from the Bear." I said to Lal.

"Ah, uh, I'd rather, uh, talk about you and your crew!" he said uneasily.

"We thought we were alone. Hearing there were other humans was quite a surprise." Bao pressed.

"We would like to know about their time with you." I told him.

"In good time!" he said, standing. "In good time! For now, let's take a look at your crew up close. Who is the little one?" he asked, approaching Svetlana. She shrank away. "Don't be afraid, little one." he said.

"Don't be afraid, Sveta." Dr. Gershawn told Svetlana. "It's okay."

Svetlana actually looked to me for confirmation. And it took a moment for me to nod to her. I wasn't completely certain whether we could trust Lal. He said all the right things, but something didn't feel right.

But I nodded.

We spent the day with the Sagarazand, being treated like adored newcomers who were being welcomed into their family. Except...

Except when I asked— several times— about the other humans. The only thing that I got in a response was that they just crossed paths, that they didn't have any extended contact. Which was in precise opposition to what Lal had told me before.

And somehow during the day the Kuuuuug and Sagarazand had made friendly and came to a grand agreement that all were happy

about.

I never got the details. When we returned to the room we had been using with the Kuuuuug in the evening, Kuura Pa was there to give me the news.

“We got good deal, trading partner never would have.” he said, Kre translating with the aid of the tablet.

“That’s wonderful!” I told him, laughing and happy for them and everyone else involved. I could never have dreamed it would turn out so well.

Or seem to, anyway.

“I’m so happy for you all. Did they accept the apology, then?”

“It helped that past leader dead now.” Horuun said.

“Glad someone offed the bastard, then.” Shauna said, laughing.

“No,” I told her, trying to be stern. “No, Shauna. No. Just–”

“Shit, I’m just saying the same fucking shit everyone here is–”

“We *are not* going to be callous about someone being killed.” I told her. I was very mad, but holding it back. “Try acting like you have some class!”

“Hell, I just–”

“Just shut up, Shauna. Shut up.”

“Callie...”

She trailed off, finally realizing how angry I was. And while there had been conversations going on around the room, it was silent now. Even Kuura Pa seemed to understand how angry I had gotten.

In the silence that followed, with everyone staring at me, the voice of Lal approaching outside and looking for us could be heard. And when he entered the room, Svetlana pulled from Bao and ran to him, laughing.

“How does this evening find my little lady?” Lal asked Sveta, scooping her up. “Are you good?”

“Uh-huh!” she shouted frantically, giggling.

“And the rest of you?” Lal asked, looking mostly at me.

“Very happy at how things turned out.” I told him, feeling the anger I had felt for Shauna just a moment before slipping away. “Did you hear all the details yet?” I asked.

“A lot of it, yes. Captain Amarz caught me just as I came back to the ship, and he sent me right back down here?”

“To play?” Sveta asked, giggling.

“The Captain wanted me to restate our invitation that you come along with us. We’d love to have you.”

“If you can take us off this hellhole, shit yeah.” Shauna said.

“Sounds fascinating.” Chief Preston said.

But every inconsistency Lal had presented me jumped to my mind, and I had a very bad feeling. It took me a long several moments with the entire crew staring at me before I was able to answer.

“I’m very sorry, Lal, but we just found a home here.” I told him. “But thank the captain for me.”

“Wait... what?” asked Anna. “Aren’t we supposed to be finding the other humans?”

“Shit yeah.” Shauna agreed.

“Callie, this is something we should consider.” Bao said softly to me, trying not to publicly disagree with me.

And she was right, I thought. But she was also wrong. So very wrong.

“We can’t go.” I told them all.

“Well if the offer is open, I’m sure as hell going.” Shauna told Lal. “Even if *Captain* Callie won’t.”

“Callie, why not?” Anna asked me.

“Just... no.” I replied.

And every one of my crew, Lal, and I think even Kuura Pa, gave me a look of disbelief. And I felt my resolve caving.

“Let my crew and me discuss this and I will get back to you.” I told Lal.

“Certainly,” he said, nodding. “You can contact me as before, by communicator. I look forward to hearing your voice again, Captain. I must be off now, though.”

He bent to set a struggling Svetlana down on her feet. She tried, but failed, to maintain a grip on him. It took Ailanna Pok grabbing onto her to stop her from following after him as he exited the room.

It was awkward to ask, but eventually I was able to explain to Kuura Pa that I needed some time alone with my crew to discuss our future. He was very amenable, and he and Horuun left us to our

discussion immediately.

"I don't like it." I told my crew.

"Why the fuck not?" Shauna asked. "It's got to be better than this shithole."

"Something isn't right with them." Chief Duval said, agreeing with me. "Can't put my finger on it, though."

"You're paranoid." Chief Kouri told him, then turned to me. "Captain, I know that this is a reasonably hospitable location for us,"

"Yes," I said.

"But shouldn't we be more interested in the long term survivability of the human race? Isn't that better served by finding other humans?"

"If they exist." Pok said, sounding doubtful. "But on the other hand, we won't know—"

"If we sit on our asses then how the hell will we ever be sure that we aren't the last humans ever?" Shauna asked. "I sure as shit ain't popping babies out just to continue the species."

"We already know about the problem with lack of diversity, Callie." Anna said, her eyes pleading at me to go.

"We've got a plan for the diversity issue." Dr. Gershawn reminded her. "That's not the issue."

"But we should always try to find others if we can!" Ensign Debartolo shouted.

And then it broke into a rowdy argument. It was no longer a discussion, and people weren't really interested in each others' opinions. They were shouting over each other, trying to *make* other people agree. Those who wanted to go outnumbered those wanting to stay five to two, with others either refraining from stating their opinion or seeming to be uncertain. It just got louder and louder, and their opinions seemed to become more and more entrenched.

"Enough!" Bao shouted. "Shut your damn mouths, every last one of you!"

Every head had whipped in her direction— my direction as well, since we were next to each other. Svetlana shrank back behind everyone across the room, as far from Bao as she could. Everyone was quiet almost immediately. Everyone except Shauna, that is, who continued mumbling her string of profanities at everyone.

"We are still a crew!" Bao shouted. "This is Captain Monroe's decision, and we will *all* follow her orders."

"She said we don't have to." Shauna said, pointing her finger at me.

"Well you're going to!" Bao shouted back at her. "And shut your damn mouth!" She turned to me. "Kiddo?"

The chance at finding other humans was almost too good to pass up, but there was something really bothering me. Several things, actually.

"Lal said they spent a lot of time with the other humans." I said. "Lal also said they spent very little time with them. He said he met them here, then said he met them near Earth. And despite not spending much time with them, he admits it took a very long time with them to learn English. I don't trust them."

"We don't have to trust them to go." Anna said. "What do you think will happen if he's lying, Callie? Does it really matter if he is?"

"It matters." I said.

"We can still go." Bao said. "Maybe Lal is a pathological liar, but we could still go, as long as we don't believe everything he tells us. Maybe he just doesn't understand things as well as he thinks."

"I just don't... trust him." I said.

"Fuck!" Shauna shouted. "So we're going to rot here because you have trust issues. Fan-fucking-tastic!"

"No!" I said. "I don't know. I just... I don't know what to do. Bao, what do you think we--"

"It is your decision." she told me.

"Then... then I decide that we don't go."

"I'm going!" three of them shouted at once.

"No! If we split up then we probably doom the entire human race." I sighed and closed my eyes. "If so many of you want to go then... then..."

"Let's take a vote." Chief Preston suggested. "If you don't want to decide, but you want us to stay together, then let us vote."

It seemed like a reasonable request-- at the time. One I'd regret in short order, as it turned out, but it seemed so very reasonable.

"Okay." I agreed, nodding. "But everyone votes. Nobody can remain undecided. I won't vote, so I'll just go with what everyone else decides."

"Fine," Bao said, sighing loudly. "Shauna, big mouth that you are, why don't you vote first?"

"I sure as hell vote to go." Shauna responded.

"One to go." Bao said. "Kre?"

"Well," she said, closing her eyes. "I think Callie is right to distrust them. I think we should stay."

"Coward." Shauna mumbled.

"One stay." Bao said. "Doc?"

"Stay." she said quickly.

"Debartolo?" Bao asked.

"Go go go, of course." he said, laughing. "Seems obvious."

"No more chatter!" Bao said, angry. "Just stay or go."

"Go." he said.

"So we're two and two." she said, nodding. "Preston?"

"Go." she answered.

"Kouri?"

"Stay." he said, surprising me and some of the others.

"Duval?"

"Stay." he said, eying me and taking a long pause before answering.

"Pok?"

"Stay." she answered.

"Wilson?"

"Well," she said, eying me apologetically. "I'm sorry Callie, but I think we need to go."

"That leaves me." Bao said. "I'm voting to go. That means we have a tie."

"Tie goes to leaving." Shauna said.

"No, tie goes to staying!" Dr. Gershawn argued. "It's where we are now, so it's the default position."

"Not everyone voted." Ensign Debartolo pointed out.

"The Captain has made clear her desire to not vote." Bao told him. "Unless you've changed your mind, kiddo?"

But Debartolo's eyes weren't on me, they were on Svetlana. He was right, of course. Svetlana was a child, though. A child, but I thought she had as much to gain or lose as any of us did.

"She's just a kid, you moron." Pok told him.

"I said..." I mumbled, my voice barely audible. "Everyone votes."

I moved forward, toward Svetlana. Everyone in the room was watching her now, and she looked scared. When I was her age having everyone stare at me like that would have terrified me. It *still* terrified me. I bent down in front of her, trying my best to block her view of everyone else, and I gathered her hand in mind with hopes to calm her.

“Sveta,” I whispered. “Sveta, listen, okay?” She nodded to me, tears gathering in her eyes. “You’re okay.” I told her. “You’re not in any trouble, and *nobody will be mad at you.*” I said, making sure to speak up on that last part so that everyone else would know it was meant as an order. “Do you like it here in this place? Back at our camp? Or would you like us all to go with Lal instead?”

She seemed to be very confused that I was bothering to ask her anything like that. I don’t know if she wasn’t used to anyone asking her what she wanted, or if she truly hadn’t understood why I was even asking.

Now I wish I never had.

“I want to go with Lal!” she said, smiling. “He’s nice to me.”

My heart sank. That made the vote six to go, five to stay. I had been overruled by a four year old. Outnumbered because I insisted she get a vote. Outnumbered because I gave up my vote because I didn’t want to make a decision.

Chapter Nine

The Sagarazand were very happy to give us time to return to our camp for our belongings. And while the Kuuuuug seemed unhappy to be losing us as new neighbors, they were so overjoyed with the new trade partnership that we had facilitated that they gave us a going away party with hopes of seeing us again one day.

The Sagarazand shuttle was very large, but it still managed to land safely at the clearing near our camp. For such a large shuttle it had very little room for passengers and crew, leaving room only for four of the Sagarazand aboard with us they came to pick us up for transport to the main ship high above the planet. Their shuttle was remarkably deficient in creature comforts, and their seats were especially hard and uncomfortable.

Once we got to the main ship we found that it was much larger, and we were allowed to dump our things in a room near the shuttle docking port before being immediately led to another room. We were instructed by Lal how to strap into their seats, and we prepared for an immediate transition to cruising speed.

“We will reach speed in less time than you can imagine.” he told us, laughing. “Our technology allows for a much stronger acceleration than yours, but it can get a bit bumpy at times. We all belt in during transition to speed.”

Before long an announcement came over a speaker that was buried somewhere in the wall near the floor alerting the crew and ‘honored guests’ to prepare for transition.

After his warning I expected a hard acceleration. I had expected to be pushed back into our seats, to feel the padding pushing hard against us and catching us in its firm, yet soft grasp as the ship moved to an ever faster and faster speed. I hadn’t, however, expected the force to come from our right side. In retrospect I should have, all the Sagarazand in the same room as us had leaned hard against the

side rest of their seats.

The acceleration leveled off partially after only two or three minutes. It was less than five more minutes before I no longer felt any acceleration at all.

“We’re clear.” Lal told us, standing from his seat.

I don’t think he was even done telling us this when the voice from the speaker began telling everyone this same thing. Or at least I assumed it was the same.

“Come,” Lal said, motioning us in his direction. “I’ll show you to the dining chamber. Captain Amarz traditionally likes his dinner immediately upon reaching cruising speed.”

“How fast are we going?” Preston asked Lal.

“Ah, well that depends on how you view distance, I suppose.” he said, cryptically. “By your measure we usually move along just shy of twice the speed of light in the atmosphere of Sagara, our home planet, as measured by our scientists.”

“We’re what?!” Preston asked.

“And we’re already up to that speed?” Bao added.

“Thereabouts.” Lal said, nodding.

“That’s impossible!” Kouri said. He shook his head back and forth. “No, but I can’t comprehend how we can accelerate that hard and not be turned into a pile of slimy gelatin by the force.”

“Was that a possibility?” Shauna asked. “Shit.”

“If there is time later on I’ll try to explain some of our technology.” Lal told us. “For now, let’s get ready for a meal.”

“Tell us some more about the humans you came across before.” I said.

“In due time, Captain.” he said, giving me a look that I couldn’t decipher. “Perhaps we will even take you to them.”

“So you know where they are now?!” Kre asked.

“Oh yes, yes we do.”

He turned his back to us and led us quickly down long corridors. For some reason all the walls, floor and ceilings of the corridors were covered in what appeared to be flat black paint. Even with powerful lights shining up from where they were embedded in the floor, it still seemed dark and claustrophobic.

Very claustrophobic.

That became a slight problem after only a short time. I could hear Svetlana whimpering, scared from the darkness I think, but Robby comforted her. I, however, got no such comfort from anyone. My breathing was becoming more and more labored as I imagined the walls sliding in on us, crushing us. It felt as though it were getting very warm in there, and my vision was starting to blur and my heart rate accelerate.

“You okay, kiddo?” Bao asked, just as we passed from the corridor into a huge and very brightly lit room.

“I will be.” I said, feeling instantly relieved that the room was so spacious. “Lal,” I said, my voice sounding as if I had just stepped from a treadmill. “Where, exactly, did you encounter the crew from the Bear?”

“Persistent, aren’t you?” he asked. “Ensign Screlli was as you are.”

“Was it near here?” I said, pushing him.

“No, not near. And the rest will have to wait until later on.”

“When?” I asked, looking over to see Captain Amarz enter.

“Perhaps after dinner.” he offered. “Over dessert?”

There were servants flanking Captain Amarz, and one of them reached out to swivel his seat around for him to sit. He motioned the rest of us to take a seat, and we all did so, lowering ourselves into the swiveling seats on the opposite side of the table as Lal and Captain Amarz.

“I hope the meal suits you.” Lal said. “It is Captain Amarz’s favorite.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” I said, adding “We appreciate your hospitality.”

Even as I was saying that, trays of food were being brought in by servants, who were clad in white jumpsuits. The trays were a shiny metal of some sort, and contained several small bowls of food, along with a plate that was completely empty. In place of where we would normally use forks, spoons, and regular knives there were instead a small ladle, a tiny pair of tongs, and a knife that sort of resembled a scalpel.

A quick glance at the rest of my crew led to two conclusions: They were all picking up the custom of placing items from each bowl onto the plate as needed quickly from our hosts, and Anna was paying far more attention to Shauna than she was to me. Again.

I tried to put that out of my mind. Let Anna and Shauna be together then, I thought. They were sitting together again, with three people between me and Anna, and it was becoming more and more clear to me that Anna and I were through.

Deities, it hurt.

But I was the captain, and I needed to retain my composure. So I did what I could to put it out of my mind, and returned my attention to my tray.

There were seven small bowls in all. The first contained a brothly looking liquid that may have been some kind of vegetable soup. The next held some kind of steamed grain that resembled rice, other than being a deep green color. The third had small cookie-looking items, but a quick glance at our hosts suggested they were actually a regular part of the meal. The fourth contained a bunch of sliced fruit, it seemed. The fifth and sixth both contained chopped and fried— from the smell of it— items that looked decidedly like green beans.

But the last bowl was the concern. It seemed to contain some kind of meat. I glanced down the table to find my crew eating everything happily, including the meat. Some seemed to be over halfway done eating by then, as well. I remember being worried they may insult our hosts by eating so quickly and showing no manners, but our hosts were eating even faster still. Captain Amarz was motioning a servant over, and the servant was already holding a second tray.

What concerned me is that I didn't want to eat the meat. I couldn't risk insulting Lal and Captain Amarz, of course, but I also had to stay true to my own morals. The two thoughts were conflicting in my mind, and I wasn't sure what to do.

"Eat up, Captain!" Lal said, motioning at my tray. "I promise you it is very tasty. Your crew seems to think so, anyway. And this is the very same meal we fed the other humans, just before they departed us."

I wanted so much to push that, to hear more about the other humans, but I didn't want to anger him. Instead I picked up the tongs and began placing items on the plate. I included some of the meat,

though I still didn't want to eat it. I took a sip from the cup of water they had provided, drank down some of the soup– which also *tasted* like vegetable soup– and chewed on some of the fried green bean looking things. They were yummy. All of the food was yummy, but I made a point to save some of the vegetables and in the end I chopped some of the meat, raised it to my mouth to pretend to eat it, then lowered it quickly below the vegetables.

“More meat?” Lal asked, just after Captain Amarz said something to him. “You all seem to be enjoying it quite well. Eat up, Captain.” he told me.

I removed the rest of the meat from the bowl, and in time slowly chopped and buried it beneath the vegetables on my plate, hoping the remains would be carelessly scraped into the garbage so that nobody would notice.

“You humans think you own the universe.” Captain Amarz said in slurred and hard to understand English. He followed that with a laugh.

“First you destroy your own planet, then want us to take you to ours!” Lal added, also laughing.

“I don't understand,” Bao said, her words trailing off as she shook her head. “I tho... thought... weren't you... I mean–”

“You said you'd take us to see the other humans.” I pointed out, suddenly feeling very vulnerable and afraid.

“Oh you'll see them, alright.” Lal said.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“Tell them.” Captain Amarz said, laughing. “You speak better.”

Lal went on to detail for me how they had met the humans aboard the UNSC Bear near Earth, long ago. They were friendly at first, apparently, and the Sagarazand even brought them to this area in space. But the humans eventually went on to detail how our kind had destroyed the environment, how we had destroyed each other with nuclear weapons when it became clear that the planet no longer had the resources to sustain so many, and that in the end we had killed off ourselves. That the remaining humans were now off to find a new home to destroy.

“It's not true.” I said, nearly frozen by fear.

“Fu... no.” Shauna said, agreeing with me.

My crew were all looking kind of dazed. I wasn't sure why. It

had to be poison, I figured. Had to. I wanted to scream out, to attack, but there were now armed guards in the room. It was hopeless.

“You tricked us.” I said.

“Of course. You are a blight in our universe, and you need to be exterminated to make things safer for the rest of us.” Lal agreed. “But now I think it is time we get you to your room while you can still stand. We don’t want to have to carry you.” he said, laughing.

“You said you would take us to the crew of the Bear!” I shouted, grabbing for anything I could get as far as information.

“Ah yes, well that is not *entirely* untrue, Captain.” he told me. “And we will take you to them. A few years ago we encountered part of their crew again. One of the large shuttles, actually. To be honest, we were looking for you. Some of our ships detected your presence in this sector many years ago. We stumbled across the shuttlecraft by accident.”

“So you... didn’t find the Bear?” I asked.

“In due time.” he said. “We have an entire fleet looking for them.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“As Captain Amarz said, you humans destroy everything.” His eyes narrowed. “This is *our* universe, Captain Monroe.”

I had no idea how the Bear could have made it all the way to this territory– even with their help– but it seemed they obviously had. And they were still around, somewhere.

I had made so many mistakes. I knew better than to come along with the Sagarazand, but my entire crew seemed to want to believe that they could be friendly. Even those who did not want to come with them seemed to at least trust that we were safe. We were so wrong.

We were stood up and marched, at the point of knives, down the corridor. Most of my crew were stumbling by then, and very few of them seemed particularly aware of what was going on.

“Here we are.” Lal said, stepping toward a door. “I told you we’d take you to them, Captain.” he said, a smile spreading.

Inside the room were several bodies. Bodies of the crew from the Bear’s shuttle. They had been dead a while, but there was still quite a stench wafting out from the room. The room of the dead.

“In you go.” Lal said, motioning.

Some of my crew finally became aware of what was happening, and they planted their feet. It did no good, the Sagarazand were much stronger than us, and we were shoved inside and the door sealed behind us.

“Shit.” Shauna mumbled. She stumbled to the far side of the room and collapsed against the wall. “Sucks ass.”

Bao made an effort to open the door, but her concentration was lapsing. There wasn’t a lot of talking going on. I’m not sure how aware everyone was, but even if they had felt up to talking there wasn’t a lot of point. We were trapped, poisoned, and doomed to die in that awful room.

Throughout that evening the crew found places to lay around the room. Tables and desks became beds, and some just sank onto the floor to lay. Kouri actually laid across a dead body, but I have to think it was only because he was so unaware that he didn’t realize it wasn’t a bed.

And I remained aware.

I spent the rest of that evening crying, trying to figure out what to do, as each of my crew passed out around the room. Near the end of the evening Dr. Gershawn had become slightly more alert, and had reached for her large purse, but she passed out before her arm reached it, her hand flopping down loudly against the desk.

And I was alone.

Alone to think about how things had gone so terribly wrong.

In The Room Of The Dead

Day 1

Bao was shivering in her sleep, so I pulled her blanket up over her. Several others felt very warm to the touch. I was worried that their fevers would get too high, but I had no clue what to do about it.

We should have been given more medical training. All I got was a quick first aid overview. I don't think anyone fathomed a situation where all the people with medical experience would be dead or dying.

I should have.

It was so dark in the room that I was having a very hard time. It felt very much like the walls were going to close in on me at any time. I have always been a little afraid of the dark. Actually, more than a *little*.

No, not always, I guess. I don't remember being scared before Mom and Dad died. I'm not sure what the relation is, but that's when I seemed to pick up the fear.

Of course now I had way too many other fears to think about to worry about my fear about how dark it was in there. I had to find a way to light the room soon.

Over the past days... weeks, maybe. Months? Bao had saved so many lives, done such a remarkable job cobbling together a craft to get us from the Freedom to that moon. Even before that, keeping the Freedom flying for as long as she had.

And now she laid twitching and dying in a cold, dark room. It

wasn't right.

Day 2

So yeah, you may notice I love Anna. It was very hard to see her and Shauna flirting with each other, but my heart ached to know that she was laying somewhere in the room, either dead or dying. I could even bear to go to her to check. I was too afraid of what I may see and how I may feel if I did.

I think I knew I liked her, a lot, several years before all this. I think it took me a long time to come to terms with this. Like right up until just before the whole mess that caused the demise of the UNSC Freedom.

I don't know why it took so long, really. Maybe because I was so determined to be captain, as misguided as that was. Maybe because I was still hurting over my parents. All I know is, I wish I had had more time with her before all of this started.

And I also now know it really sucks to sit helplessly by as someone you care about lays dying.

Day 3

Svetlana died.

She actually died the day before... no, two days before. I wasn't strong enough to talk about it before, though. Wasn't able to face up to the reality that I got yet another human killed.

A child.

A baby.

She was four years old! She couldn't die like that!

But she did. It was my fault, too. I was the reason we came on

this trip, I was the reason everyone died. I was the reason the human race was ending.

It was all because I didn't do what I was supposed to do. I didn't protect everyone. It had been my responsibility. Whether it was my job or not, it was my responsibility.

I was the one who should have known.

I was the one who should have stopped all of this from happening.

That poor angelic girl was dead now, and it was my fault. Everyone else was going to die, and that was my fault too!

If my life ended right then it was okay with me. I deserved it. But I wanted to stick around long enough to say goodbye to Bao and Anna and the others when they died.

It wouldn't be long now.

Shauna was very feverish. She seemed to be literally burning up. I kept giving her– kept giving them all– water to keep them hydrated, but she was sweating it out faster than I could keep up with. I didn't know what to do.

All I knew was that I wanted my Mom and Dad.

Day 4

In the morning I tried, yet again, to get the doors open. They had the panel locked out, but I was able to pry it loose from the wall so I could get directly to the wiring. I was hoping I could somehow hack it, somehow backtrack through their network.

But I failed.

Like I failed at everything.

Debartolo and Preston...

Alvin and Gina. They deserve to have their names remembered correctly. Though maybe Debartolo and Preston are better to use here, because it keeps their family names alive just that much longer.

Debartolo and Preston didn't look good. Not that any of them did. But those two looked especially bad. I had been dumping water on them, wetting their clothes, hoping that it would help bring down their fevers, but so far it hadn't. I didn't think they'd last until morning.

At least I had managed to get the lights on. The door panel had an option to control the lights when you enter. That part wasn't locked out, so I was able to switch the settings around on that and get the lights to come on.

I had been thinking about Captain Broussard, about how messed up she was. What would have happened if more of us were that messed up? Maybe it would have been better. Maybe we would be too unaware to know we were going to die, at least. Or maybe we would have stumbled our way around it. Maybe we would have survived.

Of course things did not go so well for her. Not well for her, and not well for the crew of the Gale. Or anyone, I guess.

I had also been thinking about Dr. Gershawn's bag. She had a variety of medications in there. I had given them all some of the analgesics to try to help with their fever, but it hadn't helped.

But what would happen if I started giving them some of the other medications, just to see if they help at all? I didn't know anything about medicine or what it was good for, though. I never studied anything medical, other than for my own issues.

My main concern was that I would make things worse. I worried that I could kill them if I gave them the wrong thing. Or even that I would give them the wrong thing, and then later on when Dr. Gershawn recovered— if she ever did— she gives them the right thing and it has an interaction with what I gave them, killing them anyway.

What if I gave them an overdose?

I didn't know what to do. Why didn't I study basic medicine? Why hadn't I at least insisted we have a full manual that told about

medications, just in case? I searched the bag, there was nothing in there.

Another failure on my part.

Another thing to regret.

The things I regretted were starting to add up. So many things. They piled on top of me, weighing me down.

Crushing me.

That wouldn't be so bad, I guess. To die from the pressure pushing down upon me. At least it would be all over with.

Day 5

Several of the crew had been shivering all night, and I had to find a way to warm them up soon. I wasn't sure how.

While sitting there, watching them shiver, I thought back to the threatening message that I found stuck to my door back on Freedom, back when most of the crew and the passengers still thought there was a chance to save the ship. If I had taken it as seriously as I should have, maybe Chief Wesley wouldn't have died. Maybe Autumn wouldn't have, either.

Just more failures on my part, I supposed.

Seems all I ever did was fail people.

Like Ailanna Pok. She died today. It wasn't a good death, and it wasn't a happy one. Not that there ever is a happy one. She began screaming out in pain, and then she vomited and... messed herself, then flopped back.

That was it, she was dead.

I tried CPR, but it didn't help.

Nothing ever helped.

The walls were closing in on me. I hated being claustrophobic, but maybe I deserved this. Maybe I deserved to suffer.

My crew sure had.

They all had suffered because of me, and I had no idea how to alleviate any of it. I even thought of just ending everyone's suffering, just to get it over with. Nobody should have to suffer like that.

So why didn't I?

What if they woke up? Even just one?

What if Anna woke up?

I still had a tiny ray of hope. It was fading, but there was still a little glimmer.

Day 6

I had to save Anna.

There was no doubt about that. And I thought I'd be able to save her, but I was wrong.

So very wrong.

I started nodding off. It was amazing, because I thought I had slept some the previous night. Still, I was trying as hard as I could to stay awake.

I didn't want to sleep.

The dreams came in sleep.

When I slept the night before I found myself back on Freedom, a five year old girl with my parents. That part of the dream is wonderful. That part of the dream brings them back to me.

"Eww! Go change your wet pants, Liddy!" Daddy says to me.

Only this time I don't wait to tell him I didn't pee them, I don't let him go off to die thinking that his daughter is still wetting herself at five years old.

"I splashed water, Daddy." I tell him.

"I know, Liddy," he laughs. "I was just teasing."

He ruffles my hair and then loops his arms under me, pulling me up into a hug. I start to cry.

I cry so hard that Mommy tries to take me from him to calm me, but I won't let go.

I can't let go!

If I let go then she'll pull me away and put me down. If I let go then they'll both go off, never knowing how much I love them. They'll never know how much I miss them.

"I love you, Daddy." I tell him. "I love Mommy."

"We love you too, Liddy. What's wrong?" he asks.

"Don't go today!" I tell him.

"We have to, Callie." Mommy tells me. "And you have school."

"But," I turn and look at her. "But you're both going to go and die, and God won't let you come back even if I'm a good girl."

"Don't be silly!" she says, yanking me free from Daddy and putting me down, as I feared. "And God wants you to die much more horrifically than we ever will."

Even five year old Callie can't quite take in what Mommy says and make any sense of it.

"What?" little Callie— little *me*, says. "What, Mommy?"

"God hates little girls who wet themselves." Daddy says, a smile broadening across his face.

"God hates little girls who love other little girls." Mommy says, only it kind of sounds like Sally Wilson's voice.

"But..." little me says.

"God hates you, Liddy." Daddy says.

His face keeps widening into a long, inhuman, overly-toothy smile. And it keeps widening.

I swing my head toward my mother, seeing that her smile is as wide as his.

And then they both keep widening, splitting their cheeks.

And then their faces turn blue, and I realize they aren't breathing.

And then their skin turns ashy gray and begins to flake away.

Their skin sags and falls away, leaving a pair of grinning skeletons standing before me in the clothing I last saw my parents alive in.

The side of the ship suddenly explodes outward, and debris sucks past me and bangs into me. My parents— or their skeletons— get sucked through the opening and into space, laughing maniacally and waving at me as they go.

That's when I woke up. I was crying, missing them more than I think I ever have.

So yeah, I didn't want to go back to sleep. I didn't think I could handle that dream again.

No thank you.

I had been looking over the contents of Dr. Gershawn's bag some more during the day. I may have to try something soon, the remaining crew weren't doing too well.

They were all sweating so much!

Shauna had begun to have small convulsions. I didn't even know what to do with her. All I could think to do was move her from the table down onto the floor. At least there she couldn't roll off and hurt herself worse.

Bao was not looking too good, either. Her mouth opened and closed every few minutes, as if she was trying to say something.

I wished I knew what it was.

Maybe she knew the answer to this. Maybe she would

understand the names of these medications enough so that she could tell me which– if any– would have the best chance of helping.

Maybe none of them would help.

I was going to have to find the answer before long, though, one way or the other.

Or give myself a high dose of something with hopes that I reached the afterlife before them.

Maybe the best thing I could do for them was to beat them there and give them a warm welcome when they arrived.

Would they even want to see me there?

Would Anna?

Day 7

Shauna was dead.

I decided to try some of the medications from the bag Dr. Gershawn had with her. I gave an injection of something that looked and sounded fairly mild to Chief Kouri. It did nothing to help his shivering, and he didn't seem to improve at all.

Two hours after that, I injected Shauna with the contents of another bottle.

It didn't go so well.

At first she seemed to rouse slightly, and I thought maybe there was some improvement or reaction.

There was a reaction alright.

Before long her convulsions got stronger, and she was bucking back and forth on the floor and banging into the walls, the table, other people.

And then the convulsions stopped.

Her breathing evened out, but there was a greenish vomit rolling from her open mouth. I leaned down next to her to check on her and she let out a loud gasp. And then she stopped breathing.

She was dead.

I checked her pulse, of course. I even thought about trying CPR, but decided it wasn't going to work anyway. No matter what I did after that, she was going to be dead. And so I let her go.

I let Anna's new love interest go.

At least I think Anna and her were going to end up being together.

But now I've managed to kill Shauna. Anna was going to blame me.

Anna didn't love me.

Had she ever?

She had never told me that she loved me. Not once. Not after all the times I had told her that I loved her. I assumed that would be a normal response, wouldn't it? If she really felt that way.

So that meant she never did.

Day 8

I wish we had never found that tablet.

Or the Kuuuuug, for that matter.

Life would have been so much better, had we not. Or we'd be dead. That may actually be better, too, though. At least I wouldn't have to sit here and wait for all my crew to die off one by one.

For Anna to die.

Ensign Alvin Debartolo was not doing well. I tried to give him water earlier in the day and it just dribbled out of his mouth. Usually they seem to swallow it reflexively, but not him. It was almost as if his body was intentionally rejecting it.

I didn't think he'd last long now. If the poison– or whatever it was– that they gave him didn't kill him then the dehydration would. Or the fever.

I was so hungry. I thought the hunger had gone away. It seemed like it had, after a while. Like I had gotten so used to being empty that my body just shut the hunger off.

It was back, though.

I was not sure, but I thought I'd even eat meat if it were in front of me. Like even a hamburger. The thought made me ill, and I'm not sure I could ever actually do it, but I was so hungry that I would have considered it.

No, I couldn't do that! There was no way I'd ever eat meat. I was going to die soon anyway, and I would rather do it with my conscience intact.

How long could a person really go with no food? We had all gone several days now– four? Five? It didn't look like it was going to end anytime soon. They all had suffered horrible poisoning, so I thought things would probably be worse for them than it was for me. At least physically.

I kind of wished I were the one laying on the table, passed out, though. At least I wouldn't have been aware of what was going on. At least I wouldn't have had to spend all that time watching everyone wilt away slowly.

Why didn't I stay on the Freedom!? I should have insisted Bao command this mission and I stay behind. They may not even be in this situation if I had done just that one little thing– forget about all the other things I had done wrong! They may all be alive and happy. Safe. Maybe even another person, the one who would have filled my seat, would still be alive and well. Maybe even Colton would still be alive.

But I couldn't go back and undo things. Couldn't make *maybe* a

reality.

Day 9

Debartolo died.

It wasn't a clean death. It wasn't nice, and it wasn't serene. It wasn't even honorable— in the line of some duty that saved others.

Instead it was violent.

He convulsed like Shauna had. Worse, maybe. And he vomited as he did it, making a greenish mess everywhere. His bowels released and he urinated himself. It was a humiliating death.

Would I have to watch Anna go through that?

I had to figure out how to stop this. I had to try some of the medication again. I had to try to save the others.

I had to find a way to save Anna before it was too late!

Was it fair that I didn't want to try anything on Anna until I knew it worked? Shouldn't I be neutral? Choose my next attemptee randomly or something? As their captain, shouldn't I?

But I couldn't do to Anna what I did to Shauna.

I got Urul killed. I made the suggestion that the Kuuuuug change leaders, and they did. Violently. Yet another terrible thing I was responsible for. If I had known their society better, if I had known how highly they valued my opinion, I wouldn't have made that suggestion.

But if I hadn't, and if they hadn't killed Urul, then the Sagarazand would have killed them all anyway.

And us.

But they were killing us anyway. Would they also kill all the Kuuuuug as well? Was all of it for nothing.

I didn't want the death of my entire crew just be for nothing.

Please no.

Day 10

I tried injecting Gina Preston with a golden liquid in the morning. The name made it sound sort of antibiotic-like to me, but I couldn't say for sure. But it didn't work.

As before with Shauna, she actually died shortly after. I didn't think the medication was the reason, though. All it seemed to do was calm her slightly. It stopped her choking, at least. She seemed... at peace.

At least compared to the others.

In the end I sat with her and talked to her while her breathing evened out. I thought she was improving, and I wanted her to wake to my voice so that she wouldn't be quite as shocked or feel like it was sudden. It just seemed like it would help for me to be there with her.

Instead she just stopped breathing.

Instead I found new tears that I wasn't sure I'd be able to cry. At least for her. No offense to Gina, I liked her a lot, but I thought the only person I could cry for now was Anna. Maybe Bao. I didn't think I could for Gina, though.

Would I never again get to see another living human being? One that was awake, in any case? Would I never get to talk to another person?

Would I forever be as alone as I was right then?

I was not alone, of course. No, I had a full crew with me there in that room. Or at least a part of a crew. At least I had Anna and Bao, Kre and Duval, Dr. Gershawn and Mr. Kouri.

It would be easier to be alone, though. It was very lonely to be

the only one who was awake and aware as each person I knew— possibly the only remaining human beings— withered and died.

And they would die. As sure as anything, they would. And then I would.

Alone.

Day 11

I could do nothing but wait there for everyone I knew— every *human* I knew— to die.

Those who hadn't already.

Days before I made attempts to get out, to open the doors. But I found them well sealed. I banged and nobody responded. I had, at one time, hoped that there would be at least one person on their crew who would feel some sympathy and let me out.

But no.

I had once thought to override the locks by hacking the door panel, but it was impossible. They had disabled the interior controls and locked the door via an external command. The system was so locked down that I couldn't backtrace it through their network to access any other systems.

So I sat.

So I watched people die.

I considered ending my own life, but I couldn't make myself do it. I was too big of a coward. Or perhaps I had managed to convince myself that I really was just sticking around long enough to keep my crew comfortable as they lay dying.

Or perhaps I had an inkling of foolish hope left in me.

Not much, if I did.

I decided I was going to try injecting Bao with one of the medications I found in Dr. Gershawn's bag. I had tried this before, several times, with different medications and crew. And I had found no success.

I think I may have actually killed Shauna.

I regretted that. After sitting there, with nothing to do but think for the past several days, I had begun to realize how petty and silly my jealousy of her was. Anna was never going to be with her. And as far as I knew, Shauna had never shown any sign she was the least interested in women. All her talking, all her attention, had always been on men.

I should not have been so silly as to think that Anna was interested in her. I knew Anna better than that. *Still knew* Anna better. She wasn't dead yet. I suspected her time would come soon, though. Her breathing had stuttered many times during the day. I almost wanted to stop checking on her— to stop even looking in her direction. It was better to not know if she was still alive or dead.

Only it wasn't.

If I stopped checking on her then I definitely doomed her to death. I was her only source of water. None of them had eaten in days, of course— neither had I, but there was a ready supply of water in the room. I imagine it was an oversight by them, but there was a small bathroom off the backside, and the water there still ran. Though they may have been poisoning it for all I knew. Maybe I was just immune to their poisons.

I had been thinking about that a lot the past days, though, and I had come to a conclusion on how they may have poisoned us. The meat. I was pretty sure they had poisoned the meat. It was the only item I hadn't eaten at that last meal. Though if that was so, I wished that I had. It was the first time in my life that I wanted to eat meat. At least the first time I remembered.

So now I was going to cross the room and fill a syringe with the strange blue liquid whose label proclaimed it Tryptometholol. I'd stick the syringe into Bao and push the button, releasing the plunger. And she'd get better.

Or she'd die.

The latter was more likely. And if that was the case, maybe just inject the medication into myself and see what happened. Maybe I'd die as well.

—

“Wha...” Bao mumbled.

I stared down at her, sure I had imagined her lips moving, the sound coming from them. Sure I had imagined her head stirring lightly.

“Wha...” she repeated.

“Bao!” I shouted, grabbing onto her arm. “Bao, are you awake?”

“Wat—”

“Water! Of course!”

I grabbed the cup I had found under the sink and tipped it to her lips, laughing and crying so hard that I spilled much of it down her face.

“I’ll get more!” I shouted, feeling almost insanely happy as I raced back to the bathroom for more water.

It took several moments, and three cups full of water, before Bao become awake and aware enough to stop mumbling and for her eyes to focus on me.

“What... happened?” she asked.

I didn’t know how to even begin to explain it all. What did she remember? How much detail should I go into? Should I tell her about all our friends who are now dead?

“What do you remember last?” I asked her. “Do you remember being brought to this room?”

“We ate.” she mumbled. “Then things get pretty damn hazy, kiddo.”

I explained what had happened that day, and when she asked I went on to explain all that had happened since.

“Thank the goddess Tyche you’re a vegetarian.” she said, actually managing a small laugh. “Help me up, kiddo.”

“Careful, you’re not looking so hot yet.”

“Hungry as hell!” she exclaimed. “Nothing in Doc’s bag for that?”

“Sorry.” I told her. “I guess it sort of goes away after awhile. At least it did for me.”

“Yeah, well, let’s get some of that... what did you stick in me, anyway?”

“Tryptometholol,” I said. “This stuff.” I held up the vial, which was still half full.

“Great. Well, I hope there’s enough for everyone.” She motioned toward Anna. “Let’s start with your girl.”

“Shouldn’t we start with Dr. Gershawn?” I suggested.

“Seems to work, so let’s get Anna and her both going at the same time.”

She was too weak to help, so I did it myself, drawing the medication from the vial and into the syringe. Shoving it down into Anna was hard, but I managed.

What if it killed her? It could. It could work differently on her, or she could be too far gone. I could be the one to finish her off.

But I had to try it. What other choice was there? Waking the doctor, maybe, but I had tried nearly all the medications in her bag already, with no improvement. In fact, I was sure I had killed Shauna with one of them.

Anna didn’t wake. Bao and I waited, staring at her, for several minutes, and then I made the decision to move on to the doctor.

Dr. Gershawn stirred in far less time than Bao had. She must have had less poison or something, because the medication seemed to work far better on her.

And by the time the I had gotten Dr. Gershawn two glasses of water, Anna was beginning to stir.

I began to cry. I hurried to her side while Bao, who was by then able to at least walk carefully, moved to Dr. Gershawn’s side.

“Anna! Oh... oh... I...”

I what? My brain went completely blank. Instead I grabbed onto her arm and hugged it against me.

“Cal...lie?” Anna mumbled, coughing slightly.

“I’ll get you water!” I shouted.

I hurried to fill the cup, then returned, tipping the cup up to her mouth, spilling half of it on her face. I was so elated that I could hardly believe that it wasn’t all a dream.

Was it?

Was all of it just me dreaming? Seeing what I wanted to see because I couldn’t deal with the reality, that I couldn’t even bear to believe that all my friends and the girl I loved were dead?

Was I asleep?

“Shauna...” Anna said.

It stabbed me in the heart as I digested what she said. Maybe my fears about her and Shauna *weren’t* quite as ridiculous as I had started to believe.

And her saying that name clearly was *not* something I’d dream. Or maybe I would, in a nightmare. But I thought I was awake.

“She’s dead.” I told her, bitterness sneaking into my voice at the realization that my fears and jealousy about Shauna weren’t silly at all. “I’m sorry to have to inform you—”

“She’s not—”

“I’m afraid that she *is* dead, Anna. I know you and her were—”

“Friends.” she said, shaking her head. “Only friends.”

“Only—”

“I love you,” Anna said.

“You... you—”

“And *only* you, Callie.” she continued, her voice growing hoarse and sinking to a whisper.

“You... you do?” I asked. “But Shauna—”

“Only friends.” she repeated, assuring me. “She’s funny, and we laughed a lot, but... she’s not you, and I love you.”

She loved me?

She loved me!

"All the times I've told you I loved you..." I said, having to stop to take a deep breath before continuing. "You never said it back."

"Yeah," Anna said, as she fought back a cough. She sipped at the water, which she was now holding up herself. "Drove you crazy, didn't it?" she asked, her lips curling into a wide smile.

All that time she had been teasing me? How could she do that to me! How could she let me go on thinking that her and Shauna could ever be a thing, and that...

But she *loved me*!

"Who's next?" Dr. Gershawn asked, obviously aware enough to converse. "You need to wake the others."

"What kind of dose should we give Svetlana, Doctor?" Bao asked.

"No clue." Dr. Gershawn said. "I'm not even sure why it works." She paused to laugh, but scrunched her face in apparent pain at the action. "The medication you've given us is actually an anti-seizure medication. How it counters whatever they gave us is something I will have to study before I understand."

"Based on weight, then, maybe?" Bao asked. "She weighs about—"

"She's, uh, dead." I told them. "She was the first to succumb to it."

Everyone went quiet. Svetlana was so tiny, so innocent. She shouldn't be dead. None of them should be, though.

"It's my fault." I told them, turning my back away from them. "We wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for me. I... I'm sorry. I know it means nothing, but I am."

"This isn't your fault, Callie." Anna told me. "Callie—"

"It is! If I hadn't decided to come along with the Saga—"

"You didn't even want to come, kiddo." Bao said.

"But I allowed it!" I shouted. "I allowed everyone else to decide, and I went along with it because..." Because Svetlana wanted to come be with her friend, Lal. "And good leaders should be able to make important decisions, not defer to a child."

"You do, Captain." Dr. Gershawn said.

"Right!" I spat out, turning to face them again. "I made such good decisions. Like not following up enough on the anomalous scans,

when I could have prevented the destruction of the Freedom? Or the dozens of bad decisions I've made since then, like even coming in the first place? I knew I wasn't the right one to lead this, but I came anyway because I wanted Anna to live. What about my decision to even go meet the Kuuuuug? That turned out *great*, didn't it?"

"Stop it!" Bao told me.

"You only came because of me?" Anna asked.

"And now Sveta is dead." I said. "And Debartolo, and Preston, and Pok, and Cook. They're all dead!"

There wasn't a lot to say after that, so I stopped. I had whined, shouted, and accomplished absolutely nothing.

"And you got us through everything alive." Anna said. She reached out for my hand and I let her take it. "I don't think anyone else would have."

"We would have all died if you didn't have a gut instinct that there was a moon that could support human life, kiddo." Bao said.

"I didn't even insist on a medical reference book, which may have come in handy here in this room. I should have insisted."

"It wouldn't have mattered." Dr. Gershawn told me.

"I got Urul killed, even!" I said. "I've just made decision after decision wrong. A million of them!"

"And there's a million things you've done right." Dr. Gershawn added. "None of us know how our decisions will turn out, not really, and we do the best we can. Some work out, some don't. That doesn't mean they're all bad decisions, Callie."

"I just... don't even—"

"Sometimes just making the decision, *any decision*, is what you have to do." Bao told me. "Sometimes indecision is worse than a bad one. At least with a bad one you are moving and trying, not standing still and letting things happen."

"You make decisions, Callie." Anna told me. "You get us in motion and make things happen."

"I don't... I don't even know what to do, though." I said, shuddering.

"Focus on the now, the next." Bao said. "Who do we think is still alive?"

They all looked very concerned, like maybe it seemed like I was on the verge of a total breakdown. Which I kinda was.

But they were also right, of course. You could never truly know the right decisions ahead of time. I made the decisions I did and

I had to believe that they seemed like the best decision at the time, given the data I had. So maybe I should just let it all go.

Maybe I had to forgive myself.

Or try.

“Kre, I think.” I said. “And Duval. Oh, and Kouri, I think, though he was struggling last night.”

“We should start with him, then.” Dr. Gershawn said. “Before it’s too late. One of you will have to do it, I don’t think I can stand just yet.”

“May as well be me.” I volunteered. “I already tried something called Ceneselastin into him, so I hope it doesn’t interact.”

“It shouldn’t.” Dr. Gershawn said. “Ceneselastin is an antibiotic, and is relatively safe.”

“Good to know, in case we catch a cold.” Bao told her.

“It wouldn’t really do much good for a cold.”

I tuned out Dr. Gershawn’s and Bao’s conversation about the relative effectiveness of antibiotics on a common cold, and I filled a syringe and poked Chief Kouri with the needle, injecting him with the medication.

He didn’t wake. His breathing evened out a little after a moment, and he started to mumble in his sleep, but he didn’t wake.

I moved on to Kre next. In less than a minute she started to wiggle around in her sleep, then began to shiver. And then she rolled on her side and vomited on the floor.

“Wha...” she croaked, her voice pinched and dry.

Bao hurried to tip water to Kre’s mouth and Kre swallowed several gulps loudly before trying to speak again.

“What... happened?” she asked, moaning. “Thirsty.”

“Here’s more water.” Bao told her, tipping it up again.

Kre raised her hand up, trying to take the cup from Bao, but she was too weak and dropped her hand again. As she did that, I injected Robby Duval with the medication as well. And by the time Robby opened his eyes two minutes later, Kre was sitting up and holding the cup by herself.

"What is that *awful* smell?" Kre asked.

"Well Ensign," Bao told her, patting her shoulder. "That would be you."

"I was afraid you were going to say that." She swiveled her head back and forth, taking in the room. "So what happened? Did they give us something to make us sleep? When do you think the others will wake up?"

We spent a few minutes explaining everything that had happened. She looked like she might get sick again.

Kouri woke— sort of— twenty minutes after injecting him. His eyes opened, but they were unfocused. He did not respond to us when we spoke, and he couldn't make words, just mumble. He did take healthy gulps of water when it was tipped to his mouth, though.

Robby jerked his legs up to his chest and groaned. He stretched them back out and turned his head toward us and coughed.

"Anyone got something to eat?" he asked.

"Ugh! How could you eat at a time like this?" Kre asked.

"No food." I said. "Sorry."

"Wonderful." he said. "How long have we been out?"

"Days," I told him. "Nine, I think. I've been trying to keep track, but I've been rather upset, and I don't know for certain when one day ends and another begins. No clocks."

"So what, they just tossed us in here to starve to death?"

"I actually think they expected the poison to take care of all of us, Mr. Duval." Dr. Gershawn told him. "I don't think they counted on our Captain being a conscientious vegetarian."

"They poisoned the damn meat?" he asked.

"Looks like." I told him.

"Great. So what now?"

What now? Great question. We die anyway? What was the reason I woke them if we were all going to die anyway?

So I didn't die alone?

"We get the hell out of here." Bao told him.

"We can't." I said.

I went on to explain to them all the things I had tried to get

out. Backtracking through their network hadn't worked. Banging on the door hadn't. I even tried prying it open.

"Did you try that?" Robby asked, glancing up.

"Try what?" I asked, following his gaze.

"Seriously, Robby?" Kre asked. "Yeah, 'cause they're just going to lock us in a room and leave an air vent open for us to escape through."

"Worth a try." he said, shrugging.

"I... poked my head up in there." I told them, shaking my head. "It's actually completely open above this ceiling, there's no ductwork. It passes through to the next room through two small openings, no bigger than fifteen centimeters across each. There is no way to squeeze through those."

"Nothing else?" Anna asked. "No pipes or fans or anything at all?"

"Just a big electrical junction box." I told her.

"A junction box?" Bao asked. Her eyes rolled over to the door. "An electrical junction box like the kind that would hold wiring heading to the doors?"

"Wir..." The obviousness of it hit me. "Maybe." I admitted.

"Well hell," she said, a huge smile breaking across her face. "Let's get you up there to check it out!"

"Me? You and Anna are--"

"Still recovering." she said. "You'll be fine."

"But I don't have any tools!" I said, my anxiety level ratcheting up past max.

"We don't even know what you'll need yet." Anna told me. "Just go take a close look to see if there's some way to open it up."

"So we have a chance? There's hope?" Kre asked. "Good. Dying sounds like a really bad plan, Callie. Please try to get that open."

It took a little while to pile enough things together in a safe way so that I could climb up into the ceiling. Before I just had to get my head up there, but this time I needed to be able to climb all the way up in. The space was short enough that I needed to be able to sort of climb into it, too, and wasn't going to be able to pull myself up the way I'd like.

And when I did it, I slid along the space toward the box I had seen. There were cross braces I had to slide over, and I wasn't sure I'd make it. The space was so short that my back and my stomach was rubbing tightly as I slid between them.

Part way through my claustrophobia became a problem that I could no longer ignore. I was breathing hard, starting to feel very panicked.

But I had to go on.

I paused and gulped down some air and forced myself to go on. To keep moving. To save them— us— if I could.

They were relying on me, and I wasn't going to let them down without at least trying.

I finally reached the box. No flat or torx head screws, no square slot or hexes. No, these were like small bolts with wings sticking out. I tried to turn one, but they didn't budge.

The conduit that led to and from the box was only about six inches long on either side, before it turned back into the wall and was inaccessible. But a close look at it made me think it wasn't electrical conduit. At least nothing like what we always used. Who knows what the Sagarazand use?

"I can't get it open." I told everyone, as I lowered myself down into the room, feeling the freedom of the extra space around me. "I tried, but the screws are too tight."

"What kind of a screws are they?" Bao asked.

I gave her a description of everything I saw, including the part about how I wasn't so sure the conduit was carrying electrical wiring. Anna suggested it could be part of an alarm system, and Kre asked if it could be part of the environmental controls. I speculated that it could be network wiring, but that it didn't really matter if we couldn't get it open.

"But if we get it open then what?" Kre asked. "Could you do anything?"

"Probably not." I admitted. "With no computer to hook into it—"

"I still have the tablet, I think." Kre said, moving to rise as she moaned in pain.

"It won't work." I told her. "No way to connect to the wiring, even if I can get to it. I'd need to be able to physically connect the tablet."

“Damn,” Bao said, shaking her head in frustration. “Maybe you could jam the wiring into the network socket on the tablet.”

“It wouldn’t work. There are a dozen wires in those connectors, Bao. No way I could hold that many wires in such a small space. And I don’t even have the tools to remove the screws anyway.”

“What kind of tool?” Dr. Gershawn asked. “I have some locking forceps, if they’ll help?”

“That might work.” Bao said, nodding. “What do you think, kiddo?”

“Maybe. But I still have no way to patch into to wiring, if that’s what it is. No way to strip it, other than my teeth.”

“Do we have something glass we can break?” Anna asked. “It could have a sharp enough edge to cut the insulation on the wire.”

“I have a scalpel.” Dr. Gershawn said.

“I still can’t connect the tablet!” I complained.

“But could you connect that?” Bao asked, nodding toward the door.

No, not the door. Not the door at all! She was nodding at the security panel that I had tried to hack. The one hanging from the wall by multiple wires.

“I’m going to need Kre and the tablet up there with me.” I told them.

I took our limited tools from the doctor and disconnected the security panel from the wall. Kre and I made our way up into the ceiling, the others using all their strength to help her up. Kre couldn’t fit over the cross braces, so she couldn’t get too near to the box, but we were able to angle her across and get her about two meters away.

The forceps worked to remove the screws, but it was everything I could do to turn them. In the limited space I had a hard time getting the correct leverage, and the last screw was so seized that I almost gave up.

And then the cover was off. I peered inside, trying to decide exactly what I was looking at. The wiring was similar to ours, but all the wires were solid black and there was no telling what they were really used for. Each wire was so tiny that it was hard to believe they actually carried any kind of high voltage or anything.

“Is that a label?” Kre asked, referring to the card on the inside of the box.

"I think so. Not that we can read it. But here, that's why I wanted you up here with me." I took a quick picture with the tablet, then handed it over to her. "See what you can make of it."

"I'm not a language specialist, Callie."

"You're the closest thing we have."

I let her work on that while I began to carefully strip some of the insulation from the wires. I didn't want to completely cut them off, I just wanted to bare the wires so I could connect the security panel from the door to them. I had to guess at which wires to connect to which.

"I think it says something about the passenger quarters. That's the best I have." Kre told me. "Sorry."

"Guess we'll see what happens, then."

I connected the screen, but it didn't show anything. I switched wires around, and spent probably nearly an hour fighting my claustrophobia while altering the configuration before the screen lit up.

"Looks like somehow I blew half the screen. Yay." I told Kre.

"Will you still be able to read it?"

"As much as before." I said. "Which is to say not at all."

I started poking the screen trying to see what reaction I would get, and somehow a partial wire diagram showed on the part of the screen that was still displaying anything.

"This thing seems to have been made so that any idiot could work it." I said, noting how just poking at it was giving some kind of result.

I poked at a section of the wiring on the screen and I heard a whirring sound in the distance. I looked at Kre and she shook her head. I shrugged and poked at another part and we heard a deeper growl of a motor somewhere.

"If you're going to do something," Bao shouted up through the opening. "Do it quickly. They've apparently figured out we're trying something and cranked the heat up to max. It's already getting really warm in here, and this thing is blowing air hotter than my blow torch."

The heat had just come on? I wondered if my poking around had triggered it somehow. I poked at it again and the roaring sounds got louder.

“They’re really cranking it up.” Kre said.

“It wasn’t them, it was me.” I told her.

I poked again and the heater kicked completely off. Poking another section of wiring and the roaring started again.

Well that wasn’t all that helpful.

I poked at it twice more, shutting the heater off again, and I analyzed the wiring shown on the screen again. I had no clue what any of this did, and there was no text that I could ask Kre to look at to see if she could figure out how to interpret it.

“I don’t know what the hell they are doing,” Bao said through the opening. “But whatever you’re going to do up there, you better do it pretty quick. I’m pretty sure they figured out we’re still alive, kiddo.”

“Working as fast as I can.” I said.

“Well as long as they don’t turn the heat or air conditioning on again we’ll be okay, unless they decide to come down here and take care of us with bullets.”

“Wait, they turned on the air conditioner?” Kre asked.

“Yeah, just a minute ago. But they turned it off almost right away.”

“I think that was also me.” I said. I poked at the last section again. “Did the air conditioner just come on?”

“Hang on.” Bao answered. “Yeah, it’s blowing cold again.”

“Huh.” I said. I poked at that spot twice more. “And it’s off now?”

“Sure is, kiddo. Was that you?”

“Great.” I said, frustration dripping from my voice. “Well, we found the ventilation system controls. Not that it is helpful or anything.”

“Maybe another control will work the door.” Kre suggested.

“I doubt it.” I told her.

But I kept going. I poked at more wires on the screen, some seeming to do nothing and others seeming to do nothing worth doing—such as setting off the sprinklers.

One of them set off an alarm somewhere outside of the room. I poked at that one again, but the alarm didn't turn off.

"That's great," I said. "Apparently I just shouted out to the Sagarazand that we're all still alive and kicking."

"They should have known that anyway." Kre said. "But yeah, that sucks."

Twenty more minutes of poking and trying produced no results. I didn't even manage to silence the alarm.

Kre and I gave up and climbed back down into the room. While we were up there the others had arranged the bodies of our friends and those of the other dead crew along one wall.

"It's no use." I told them. "We're not getting anywhere."

"Well thanks for that revelation." Robby said. He was up now, walking about the room.

"We should say something." Dr. Gershawn said, gesturing toward the bodies.

"Like a funeral?" Kre asked.

Dr. Gershawn nodded, and we all gathered in an arc around the bodies. It was hard to look at them, even covered as they were.

"We gather here—" Dr. Gershawn said.

But she was interrupted by a loud thump. We all turned and jumped at the sound. It took only a fraction of a second for us to look at each other and come to the joint decision to move to the back of the room, behind a table.

Just in case.

"We're so dead." Kre said.

"I did not sit in a room full of dead people for all this time just to give up, Ashley!" I shouted.

"Quiet!" Robby shout-whispered.

"That's my girl." Anna said at the same time, gripping my hand.

The doors creaked open slowly, making a mechanical ticking sound as they did. And seconds later a Sagarazand stepped in between them.

Chapter Ten

Robby raised his gun– which I had forgotten he even had.

“Humans?” the Sagarazand said. The first female Sagarazand we had met. At least I thought it was a female. “Quickly, we do not have much time.” she continued, waving her hands in our direction.

“Back!” Robby shouted. “I’ll shoot.”

“You should shoot anyway.” Bao told him.

“No!” I said. “Hold that. We need her to be able to get out.”

“The door is open now.” Anna said, seeming surprised by my statement.

“We don’t know how long it’ll stay that way.” I explained to her.

“I came to help.” The Sagarazand told us, her eyes scanning across the room and landing on the bodies.

“Explain.” I told her.

“Most of the crew is in a meeting.” she said. “They are in a conference room, on a video with another crew.”

“All of them?” Bao asked, rising to a full stand now.

“Not all. Not me, not the flight crew.”

“And you’re helping us?” Bao asked.

“Yes. Come with me.” she said.

“Why?” Robby asked her. “Why would you help?”

The Sagarazand motioned toward the pile of bodies and nodded their direction.

“Because of them.” she told us. She turned to look our way. “Because of Grigory.”

She sighed and stepped our direction, but Robby raised the gun up and sighted on her. She scooted back and leaned against the wall near the door.

“Grigory was very special to me. And from the time we found this crew near your planet, Earth? Since that time, he and I grew very

close. And Captain Amarz just..." She slammed her fist back against the wall. "He executed them for no reason at all!"

"What are you saying?" Dr. Gershawn asked her.

"He killed them. Because humans could not be trusted," she said, her voice dripping in anger. "Because they are conquerors and would take over the universe. Or out-compete us for resources in the universe, more likely."

"You speak English very well." Anna pointed out.

"I was close to Grigory." was her response.

"You... loved him?" Dr. Gershawn asked her.

"If we act now, most of the crew is gathered in one room. We can take them now before they even know you're alive. None of us knew you were alive until you set off that alarm and I was sent to take care of it. That's when I figured it out. They all think I'm busy fixing a coolant leak."

"And you'd turn your back on your own people for us?" Robby asked.

"For Grigory." she said, nodding.

"I don't trust her." he said, turning to face me. "Captain?"

"What's your name? Why were you the one who came?" I asked her.

"I'm part of the maintenance team, and my name is Shay." she said, her lips curving into a small smile. "Or at least that's what Grigory called me."

"Okay Shay, we'll go with you." I told her.

What choice did we really have?

"Hang on a minute, Captain." Dr. Gershawn said.

I turned and watched as she hurried over to the bodies of my dead crew. The crew I had gotten killed. I wasn't sure what she was doing at first, but soon realized she was making sure they were dead. It only took a second for her to check Gina Preston, then Svetlana, and when she moved on to Shauna she paused. It took a moment, but she went back to Svetlana and felt her again.

"Dr..."

"Sh!" she told me, as she dug in her bag.

She pulled out a some sort of digital meter and stuck a pointy probe directly into Svetlana's chest. After changing a setting on the screen, she stared down at it for a very long time.

“What is she doing?” Anna asked me, whispering.

“I said be quiet!” Dr. Gershawn shouted angrily, never looking back our way.

Anna looked at me and all I could do was shrug. We all stood there, waiting, as Dr. Gershawn stared at the screen and held the probe against Svetlana’s body. Eventually she sighed and lowered her head, her hand holding the meter drooping.

“When I first checked her I just thought...”

The meter beeped.

Loudly.

Dr. Gershawn quickly sucked in a breath, her head rising, her hand with the meter in it turning so she could read the screen.

Then nothing.

Dr. Gershawn sighed again, began to lower the meter, and there was another beep. And after a moment, another.

“Oh dear lord,” Dr. Gershawn said.

“What is it?” Bao asked.

“She’s alive.” She stood and turned to us, a huge smile breaking across her face. “This girl is alive!”

“What?” Anna asked.

“How the hell?” Bao shouted.

“Impossible!” I said.

“She’s alive!” Dr. Gershawn repeated, bending back over Svetlana.

My whole crew were saying things at once, and I couldn’t make out any of it. All I knew was that the doctor had just said that I... I hadn’t killed Svetlana.

I hurried over to where they were, nudging past Dr. Gershawn and gathered Svetlana in my arms. I hugged her against me as I cried.

“I’m so sorry, Sveta!” I said. “Please wake up. Please wake up. Oh please wake up!”

“I think she’s in a coma.” Dr. Gershawn told me. “I think what you gave her actually may have induced a coma, Callie.”

“So... so she’s still going to die?” I asked, my heart breaking all

over again.

Why do that? Why get my hopes up, make me feel like I did something that just maybe turned out good *for once*, when it didn't turn out that way at all?

"Not if you gave her what I think you gave her!"

"What di—"

"Which medication did you give her, Callie?" Dr. Gershawn asked, digging into her bag.

"I don't—"

"Was it this one?" she asked, holding out a vial.

"I, uh—"

"I figured it must be! That is so great!" she said, actually pumping her fists. "If you mix this medication with almost any other medication it can cause death!"

"That's good?" Anna asked, looking as confused as I felt.

"Yes, yes, of course!" the doctor said.

"I only gave her one medicine." I told her, feeling myself sinking even deeper into sadness.

"But Callie," she said, smiling "You forgot about—"

"The damn poison?" Bao asked.

"Yes!" Dr. Gershawn said, glowing.

So it interacted with the poison like it would another medicine? That seems... lucky. Or not.

"You said, uh," I started, but I had to pause to fight back a sob.

"You said it kills if given with other drugs." Anna said, completing what I was thinking.

"Usually." she said, nodding. "Callie, you must have given her a very small amount, because this very clearly didn't kill her! I think it almost did, but it just slowed her system down enough to keep the poison from doing her in, and it put her in an induced coma."

"So is she still going to die from the poison?" I asked.

"We can give her the treatment for that." she explained. "And then in a few days she should wake up from the coma, hopefully."

"When?" Anna asked.

"Maybe a day, maybe three, I don't know. I would be very surprised if it went five."

"So she's definitely going to wake up?" I asked, feeling hopeful again.

"Well, no, not for sure." she said.

"Oh."

My heart sank again. So she still would probably die.

“But I’d say she has over a ninety percent chance of pulling through this.” Dr. Gershawn added.

“Ninety is good.” Anna said, lightness in her voice. “Did you hear that Callie?” she asked, grabbing both me and Sveta in a hug. “She’s going to live.”

“Yes.” I said.

I waited a moment to find out if Dr. Gershawn was going to reverse herself again, yanking the rug from under my feet once more. When she didn’t, I finally felt like Sveta was really going to survive.

“Thank God!” I said, finally allowing myself to feel a touch of happiness.

—

We peered around the corner, eying the door to the room where Shay said the meeting was being held. She was by my side, fiddling with a panel in the wall where she had attached several wires.

“This should flood the room with the contents of our filtration system.” Shay said. “I’ve sealed the ventilation to every other room, so we should be safe for now.”

“And the dirty air is going to knock them out?” Anna asked.

“It will kill them, eventually.”

“So you lock the door and flood the room,” Robby said, nodding. “That’s a solid plan.”

“I cannot lock the door.” Shay told us with a sheepish shrug.

“Won’t they come running out as soon as they realize they’re being poisoned?” I asked.

“Let us hope not.” Shay said, connecting two wires. “We are about to find out.”

“Wait, you started it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say you were going to—”

“Captain!” Robby said.

He stepped around the corner and raised his gun, firing off two rounds before ducking back.

“That’s two of the guards.” he said. “How many are there?”

"There should be twenty more within." Shay replied.

"How many bullets do you have?" I asked Robby.

"Left? Maybe four." he responded.

He stepped back out and fired two more shots.

"Or less." he said at the sound of the click.

"Damn," Bao exclaimed.

When I looked up at her, her eyes were focused down the hallway. There were three other Sagarazand heading our way.

I had led us into a trap.

Again.

"Hold it!" Shay said, repeating herself in their language.

She stepped toward the approaching Sagarazand and shouted out something else. At that point she shoved a long shaft of metal through the man's chest.

"I'm sorry, Nael." she whispered. She looked up at the others.

She shouted out a phrase in the Sagarazand language and the two coming our way paused and looked at each other. They asked something and Shay nodded. The two moved our way quickly again, and Robby took up a defensive posture.

"Wait!" Shay told him. "They are going to help."

The two went past Robby and hurried down the hallway. I stared at Shay for a moment, not sure what had just happened, but happy she was on our side. The woman could be scary.

We all ran toward the room as well as we could in our weakened state, and I hoped the poison from the room wouldn't seep out into the hallway and take us all down.

Robby fell to one of the Sagarazand almost immediately, being flung across the hall into the wall so hard that he collapsed onto the floor. The two who had come to help us were terribly outclassed and outsized. The guards who were coming out to get us were enormous, and I got the feeling that the Sagarazand helping us were the

undersized, non-combative type.

Bao, Anna, Dr. Gershawn and Shay all jumped onto one of guards, punching and kicking in a frenzy. The two Sagarazand helping us teamed up against another. The problem, I could see, was that it left one more guard who had made it to the hallway.

And he was heading toward me, his large eyes narrowing in anger.

“You don’t want to do that.” I told the guard, hoping he’d at least pause to consider what I was saying.

It didn’t work. He never even slowed. Instead he raised a weapon of some sort, some kind of club, in my direction and neared me. My heart was going overtime, and I was concerned that I’d die from a heart attack before the Sagarazand ever got to me.

I heard the thud of Bao, then Anna, falling backwards onto the floor near the side of the one approaching me.

“Anna!” I shouted.

The guard nearing me stumbled and turned to look down, where Bao had grabbed onto his leg. He shook his leg and kicked at her angrily. And before I could even think to ask ‘what next’, the guard they had been attacking with Shay had grabbed onto the front of Anna and Bao’s shirts and yanked them away, growling angrily.

That once again freed up the one who had been pursuing me, and he refocused his efforts in my direction.

There was a loud crack sound, then a shout of pain. And still the guard approached me.

He stepped close to me, his eyes boring into mine, as he reached his hand out to grab onto me.

And then he fell over, missing me by less than half a meter, his hand actually reaching out to clutch at my pants leg before releasing as he fell motionless.

I glanced up to see that Shay, Anna, Bao, and the two Sagarazand who were helping us had managed to overpower the

remaining guards. Even more, Shay had moved to the control panel beside the door and was in the process of closing it off from the hallway.

"They are all dead." Shay told us. "The ones in the room. We should lock these up or kill them. I leave that decision to you." she said, her eyes landing on me. "You *are* the captain, are you not?"

"Yes." I mumbled. "For now."

"Then I apply for acceptance into your crew, Captain." she said. "If you will allow."

"Of course she'll allow it!" Anna shouted, grabbing onto me.

"It's... I..." I said, not sure what to do. "Bao... you take over."

"It's your call, Captain." Bao replied. "But she did help us."

"So you want to allow her to join?" I asked.

"Like I said, your call."

"No, huh-huh. It's your call. I resign. You're the captain now."

"Are we back at this?" Anna asked. "You are a great captain." "I almost got us all killed!" I pointed out. "I *did* get Shauna and Ailanna and Debartolo and Preston all killed. And Svetlana!"

"I am way more responsible for that than you are, kiddo." Bao said.

"Me too!" Anna added. "We took a vote, and I voted to come. Callie, you're the only one who has the intuition, the knowledge, and the tenacity– not to mention the respect from the rest of us– to be a real leader." she told me, hugging me. "Sorry Bao, no slight to you." she added.

"Just speaking the truth." Bao said.

"But–"

"If you hadn't taken the initiative– taken the risk– to start trying medications on us, we may all still be laying there. Or dead." Dr. Gershawn said.

Maybe they were right. Maybe I really needed to stop whining, stop doubting myself, and just start being the leader.

And Anna loved me!

Me!

If Anna could have faith in me, if Anna could *love me*, then maybe I could be worthy. Maybe I could! Maybe it was time I really stepped up and stopped blaming myself for everything that had happened in the past.

“Okay, Shay,” I said. “We’d be happy to have you. And thank you for your help.”

The two Sagarazand who had come to help grumbled something to Shay, then turned their eyes toward me.

“They want to join you as well.” she said. “They do not speak your language well.”

“They’re welcome to join.” I said, nodding. “And thank you all.”

“Captain,” Shay said. “The others were on a call with our fleet when it happened. It is likely that we’re going to have visitors soon.”

“What do we do?” Dr. Gershawn asked.

“We have to get out of here.” I said. “Can you fly this thing?” I asked, facing the Sagarazand.

“Yes,” Shay said. “They are part of the bridge crew. But there are still others up there. I do not know if they will be as helpful.”

“Well hell,” Robby muttered, just making it to his feet. “That’s great news. I haven’t been beaten up in at least two minutes. I was getting concerned I’d never get to experience that again.”

We hurried to the bridge and found several faces staring at us in shock. Shay explained to them what was happening and asked them to join us. Two agreed, one did not.

“What do we do with this one, Captain?” Shay asked. “He will not join us.”

“Kill him.” Robby said.

Some of the other Sagarazand chattered and shouted in their language, and seemed to be arguing. I wasn’t sure what they were saying, but it didn’t sound good.

“What?” I asked Shay. “What are they saying?”

“They are arguing over killing or locking him up.” she explained.

“Do you have... I don’t know, escape pods? Or another small shuttle? We need to keep the one, but is there another we could spare?”

“There are life pods.” Shay explained. “They just float in space and emit a signal so they can be found.”

“Stick him in one of those. Sounds like the rest of your fleet will be coming along to find him soon.”

“If they will stop for him.” Shay said. She didn’t sound like it

was all that likely.

"It's not our choice at that point. We have to get out of here."

"Where will we go?" Anna asked.

"Any place but here." Kre answered.

"Shay, was what Lal said about them searching for the Bear true? Did they have any clues where to find it?"

"It was true," she said. "I think. I do not know what he told you, but our people did find the Bear. We brought them to this sector, docked to one of our ships."

"What happened to them?" Bao asked. "Are they back on your planet?"

"Did they kill them?" Robby asked.

"The crew of the Bear broke free and returned to their ship, most of them, and they managed to... get away from the ship they were attached to, but the damage they caused in the process destroyed the ship."

The Bear is gone then? So we really were the last humans? I really did preside over the end of the human race? I didn't believe we had enough people to restart our species.

This was the end.

"If the Bear was destroyed," Dr. Gershawn asked. "How did the other humans get on board?"

"Destroyed?" Shay asked. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "It was our ship, the Sagarazand ship, that was destroyed. The Bear escaped. And from what I understand, part of them landed on that moon back there with the... Kuuuuug, I think you called them?"

"The Bear still exists?!" I asked.

"As far as I know," she answered.

"Where?" Kre asked.

"Somewhere in this sector."

And with that, we had a plan. We would go in search of our people. In search of the other humans. Of the rest of us.

"Shay, you're my interpreter. I need this crew to get us moving in the opposite direction of your fleet."

"Yes, Captain," she said. She rattled off instructions and the others set about making it happen, moving to their consoles.

"Robby, can you and one of the Sagarazand lead this one to the pod?" I said, motioning toward the Sagarazand who refused to join us. "Kre, go along to help, and see if you can start figuring out

their language.”

“I can help with that, when we have time, Captain.” Shay said.
“I taught Grigory basic Sagarán. I can help your crew.”

“Sounds great, Shay. Kre, Robby, you two hurry up. I want you to start learning the controls, Ashley. And Robby, you can start figuring out if this ship has any weapons.”

“We do.” Shay said.

“And Dr. Gershawn, can you please go check on Kouri and Sveta?”

“What about me?” Anna asked.

“You need to stay here and help me out.”

“Have I said I love you lately?” she told me.

She loved me!

“Everyone get moving!” I shouted. “Shay, have them get us out of here right now!”

“Yes Captain.” everyone chorused, even one of the Sagarazand.

I lowered myself into what I thought was the Captain’s seat—my seat— and nodded at the man on the helm to get us out of there. He punched a button and we accelerated, shoving me back in my seat slightly.

Maybe I was ready to be Captain now.

Ready to lead us out into the unknown, racing away from a fleet of angry pursuers.

Ready to find the Bear, and the other humans.

Ready to save our species.

The End

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